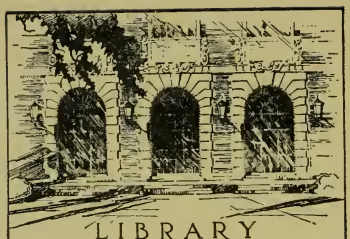
A Life's Remorse

By The Author of "Molly Bawn"



A LIFE'S REMORSE.

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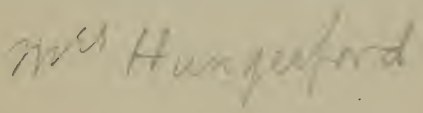
A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MOLLY BAWN," "PHYLLIS," "UNDERCURRENTS,"
"THE HONBLE. MRS. VEREKER," &c., &c.

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow."



IN THREE VOLUMES.

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TO

HELEN C. BLACK,

IN MEMORY OF

MANY PLEASANT HOURS GIVEN TO ME
BY HER.

A LIFE'S REMORSE.

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CHAPTER I.

"It's a *shame!*" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with all the emphasis that belongs to her. She has one young man on her right and another young man on her left, and is feeling so happy that she believes herself to be virtuous.

"What's a shame?" demands Lady Stamer with a supercilious glance at the first speaker. She feels herself so entirely beyond Mrs. Wylding-Weekes both temporally and spiritually, that she hardly puts her best foot foremost when entering on a scrimmage with her, and therefore seldom comes off anything but second best.

"Why, this projected marriage between

that pretty Evelyn D'Arcy and the old man who hangs round here," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, without a pang of remorse at the vulgarity of her speech.

They are all "hanging round here" just now. Mr. Crawford having invited almost everybody to a day's skating on his lakes, and to tea and etceteras afterwards, everybody has accepted the invitation and has come.

"If you mean Mr. Crawford," says Lady Stamer, with a sneering severity that would have subdued anybody but Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, but is completely thrown away upon her, "I think you take a distinctly wrong view of the case. To me, she appears in no other light save as an exceptionally fortunate girl."

"Ah!" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. There is a good deal of contempt for the person answered conveyed in this seemingly simple monosyllable. As a fact, Mrs. Wylding-Weekes holds no one in reverence. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself would be to her, if brought into immediate connection with him, a mere common mortal and nothing

more. "That's because you know nothing about it," says she presently.

"'To know nothing at all about it' is the one happy state of life," says Mr. Blount with prophetic instinct. As usual, he is on the spot.

"That is to be distinctly deceitful, Bartholomew," says Lady Stamer, addressing Mr. Blount, but pointing her remark at Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "One must be a person of remarkably distorted views of what is right and what is wrong to give way to such a sentiment as that."

"Well, he may be right, or he may be wrong," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes impartially; "but as far as he goes I agree with him. Them's my sentiments too." She laughs in an altogether aggravating way.

"They are *not* mine," says Lady Stamer sternly, trying to look down this obnoxious young woman, and failing miserably.

"They wouldn't, of course," says the obnoxious young woman; "'tisn't good enough for you, is it? You haven't lived up to this style of thing. Time's up for you, eh? But

I assure you, Batty has hit a truth. He's done it in the eye. *He* knows!"

"He knows what I do *not*—the new *argot*," says Lady Stamer crushingly. "I do not aspire to such knowledge. I confess it is beyond me—beyond the compass of *most* well-bred people."

"Beyond *me*, you mean," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes unembarrassed, and, in effect, rather delighted at this prospect of a row royal. She happens to be in great feather to-day—literally speaking—her frock being Parisian and beyond question.

To be well gowned is to be of good spirit, as most people will acknowledge. In that delightful book, "Backlog Studies," the author tells us that in Boston they hold the opinion, "That there is a satisfaction in being well dressed which religion cannot give."

This is perhaps going far—but not farther than the honest truth will carry some people. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes is at heart a Bostonian.

"But I'm not so entirely out of it as you moral people may wish to believe," says she, beaming cordially upon Lady Stamer, who

detests her. "I'm full of the loveliest sentiments! I believe in all the old trash. Such as love, for example."

"That is not trash," says Lady Stamer. "Nobody with a heart could call it so."

"No. Nobody with a heart," says her tormentor.

"To return to our original topic," says Lady Stamer with a frown. "I consider Evelyn D'Arcy a very lucky girl."

"I don't," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes promptly.

"Well, of course not. You have such peculiar views."

"Have I? How you've studied me. You are nearly as good a friend as Mr. Wylding-Weekes. *He* tells me of all my little peccadilloes. He is *full* of information about them. He is a perfect treasure," says Mr. Wylding-Weekes's wife with a radiant smile. "He is a regular almanac so far as my sins go. He can give you day and date for every one of them. So can you, it seems."

"I assure you, you credit me too far. Mr. Wylding-Weekes may naturally feel an anxiety

about you—but so far as *I* am concerned—— But we were talking about Evelyn D'Arcy, were we not? and her approaching marriage. You have led me very far afield, but to begin at the beginning, I will at once say that I do not see how she could have done better."

"I do," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes promptly. "A lot better. For example, there is——"

"*Just a moment!*" says Lady Stamer rising abruptly, but gracefully, and hurrying across the grass to somebody who undoubtedly has not sent her so much as a glance of invitation.

"Sold!" says Mr. Blount, looking at Mrs. Wylding-Weekes.

"Is that how you look at it?" says she. "'*Io triumphe*,' would be my cry."

"Well, I hardly know," says Mrs. Vaudrey hesitating. She has just come up, and has heard something of the discussion, and is divided between her longing to agree with *anybody* against Lady Stamer and her desire to befriend Mr. Crawford, of whom she is a thorough partizan. There is a third battle in her mind that would at a pinch upset all the others. Evelyn—if she were to be made un-

happy—every one else might go to the wall first. Upon this matter even she and her Reginald are of accord.

"Pouf!" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "Don't you think Eaton Stamer would be a more desirable companion for even a part of one's life than that old fossil up here?"

"But if Eaton doesn't care for her—and if Mr. Crawford (you shouldn't call him a fossil, my dear; there are older men than he)—and if our good host of to-day is in love with her, and she with him——"

"If! Rubbish," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "Oh, here is Lady Stamer back again. We're still at it, Lady Stamer. Still discussing the rights and wrongs of this marriage that *I* call iniquitous. See what it is to be stranded in a small country place with only one idea between the lot of us. We are now wondering why on earth Evelyn has not chosen a young man—instead of Mr. Crawford."

"Very few young men have anything to recommend them, whereas Mr. Crawford——"

"Has made his pile! I know all that. But money isn't everything. That's what the

good folks say, and you're a good folk, aren't you, Lady Stamer?"

"I don't profess to be clever enough to understand slang," says Lady Stamer. "But I hope I do my duty at all times."

"Ah, you see, you *do* understand," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes with an irreverent laugh. "Well, but if money *isn't* everything, why should we congratulate Evelyn on this engagement?"

"Because Mr. Crawford is a most desirable *parti*. He is honourable, charitable—a good man in every respect. I'm sure I can't imagine what he sees in her," with pious malignity. "But as it is, I should think she ought to be proud to know herself his wife. What, after all, could a *young* man have to offer her in comparison?"

"His hair, and a tooth or two," says Mr. Blount mildly.

"Nonsense! Don't be absurd, Bartholomew," says Lady Stamer angrily. The apocryphal young man has now become Eaton Stamer to all present, and is as distinctly on the *tapis* as if his name had been mentioned.

"Has Mr. Crawford no hair—no teeth? Pray be reasonable—if you can."

"I was wrong!" says Mr. Blount, still very mild. "His hair is all his own, so—let us hope—are his teeth. But the 'young man' might have hair too? *May* he have hair?" with an imploring glance. "And it might be brown instead of white."

"Mr. Crawford's hair is not white. It is barely grey. A most becoming colour I always think."

"So do I—and so suggestive," says Mrs. Coventry, with her ill-natured smile. "Silver shade, isn't it? Miss D'Arcy evidently admires it too."

"I think any one who would seek to upset such a marriage as this," says Lady Stamer with a fell glance at Mr. Blount, who receives it with an amiable grin, "might honestly be regarded as Miss D'Arcy's worst enemy. It is a chance that she will never get again. And if it so happens that he *is* a little older than her, what does that matter?"

"Nothing—nothing!" says Mr. Blount airily. "A century or two, what is it after

all? There are many delightful old people about the world. Santa Klaus and old Father Christmas, for example. Evelyn has loved them in imagination from her youth up. Why should she not love one of them in reality now?"

Mrs. Coventry laughs.

"You are a little severe on Mr. Crawford, don't you think?" says she.

"Not a bit. He's as old as Father Abraham," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, "whilst Evelyn is a baby."

"Oh, a very clever baby, surely," says Lady Stamer, with a sneer.

"You aren't much of a judge of character if you think *her* mercenary," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. "She's got about as much idea of hooking any one as the child unborn."

"Eh?" says Lady Stamer, raising her glasses to survey her pretty opponent with the proper amount of scorn necessary to the occasion. "You mean——? You really speak such a very remarkable language that —er——"

"I'll translate it if you like," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with the utmost amiability. "What I mean is, that if Evelyn had a grain of the common sense that *ought* to belong to all girls in these days when matrons think they can ride rough-shod over them, she would have landed that young man of whom Batty has been speaking, long before this. See? Shall I now translate to you the young man?"

"No, thanks," says Lady Stamer hastily, and with a glance that would have killed her, if there was death in any glance.

Mrs. Wylding-Weekes laughs gaily—a little maliciously perhaps—rises, beckons to both her cavaliers, and having made Mr. Blount a present of a small grimace, sails away towards the other end of the lawn.

"How society can tolerate that young woman," says Lady Stamer wrathfully, as the young woman fades from view round a corner, "has been to me a moral puzzle for some time past."

"She is amusing. Society forgives a good deal to the people who are good enough to

afford them a laugh now and then. It is an age barren of laughter," says Mrs. Coventry.

"Her support of Evelyn D'Arcy is hardly one to be desired," says Lady Stamer. "'Birds of a feather,' is an old adage and a true one. This sudden friendship of hers for that wild little girl, who, I am told, does nothing but train horses from morning till night, argues badly for the latter."

"Yes? But how?"

"Well. *Arcades ambo*, you know."

"Oh, my *dear* Lady Stamer!"

"You need not take the ordinary slang interpretation. But really I can hardly imagine that Mrs. Wylding-Weekes can mean good to Evelyn D'Arcy."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps she desires to lead Mr. Crawford into her own net, and so would prevent his marriage with Miss D'Arcy."

"You said 'Oh' to me just now. Surely I have stronger grounds for saying 'Oh' to you now. That is a very condemnatory suggestion of yours about Mrs. Wylding-Weekes. However, the real point of discussion is Mr. Crawford's infatuation for that girl. It is the

luckiest thing that could have happened to her. Although scarcely a friend of hers—you know I do not altogether approve of her—still I should be glad to see her well married."

"I can quite understand. She would be out of the way," says Mrs. Coventry with calm impertinence. "She is very pretty. I don't know her well, but it has often occurred to me, that people—young men, you know—might find her attractive."

"They do," says Mr. Blount, with feeling.

"You are not *the* young man in question, are you?" asks Mrs. Coventry, laughing. It gives her a sort of pleasure to hanker round the one subject that gives Lady Stamer acute anxiety.

"No, but one of them," says Mr. Blount. "You must not think she is reduced to a miserable unit."

"Young men as a rule haven't got a penny," says Lady Stamer. "They are totally impecunious. If Bartholomew were, as you suggest, a suitor for Miss D'Arcy's hand—which I am glad to be able to declare he is not—what *could* he offer her?"

"Nothing," says Mr. Blount mournfully. "Neither money nor position. Not"—thoughtfully—"not even a wrinkle. Yes, yes, you can see for yourself, Mrs. Coventry, that Crawford has very greatly the pull over me."

"You have proved your case," says she. "But are you sure you aren't the real and original young man whom you yourself introduced? You speak with so much feeling that one almost—— No, you need not speak. Of course, we all know that the really clever thing is to tell as few lies as one can manage; why should I throw you off the line?"

"You couldn't," says he. "If that 'young man' of whom you speak exists, it is *not* me, worse luck."

"Ah!" she turns her bright but malicious eyes on Lady Stamer. "Perhaps you can tell me?" says she.

"The last person in the world," says Lady Stamer coldly. "I know no more of Miss D'Arcy and her love affairs than you do."

"That is nothing."

"Well, why pre-suppose any love affair,

save this with Mr. Crawford? If he is found willing to give himself away to an unformed creature like that, why should not she be found not only willing, but thankful, to give herself to him?"

"Why not? indeed," says Mr. Blount. "Ah! Here comes the bride-elect."

CHAPTER II.

"You don't find it too cold?" says Mr. Crawford, who has come up to them with Evelyn.

"Not in this sheltered spot," says Lady Stamer. "And what a mild day it is. You are going on? Dear Evelyn! so pleased to see you." With a little smile and hand-pressure that might have done duty for a life-long friendship. Evelyn, turning large inquiring eyes on her, drops her hand languidly.

"Yes, to the waterfall. Miss D'Arcy has never yet seen it in all its magnificence. But last week's rains have swollen it to a quite tremendous beauty. Will you," with reluctant politeness, "come with us?"

"Not just yet," says Lady Stamer, who has been daunted by Evelyn's direct stare. "Mrs. Coventry and I have promised ourselves a look at it by-and-by."

"Oh! have we? I didn't know," says Mrs. Coventry, who is nothing if not disagreeable.

Her words fall only on the ears of Lady Stamer, however, the other two having passed out of sight, Evelyn pale, but with her lovely face full of light and full too of a sweet determination to be *good* to Mr. Crawford.

On and over the wooden bridge they go, with the river rushing beneath their feet and the roar of the distant cataract within their ears.

Evelyn, pausing at the end of the bridge, leans her arms upon the wooden parapet and gazes down into the stream, that here runs calmly, if swiftly. Through the clear water the brown stones shine, and every now and then a darting thing flashes from bank to bank.

"How bright it is, how calm, how *clean;* quite like a lovely life," says Mr. Crawford in a low tone. "One can see right into it. There is nothing hidden. Down in the very depths of it there are only polished stones, that shine like jewels; all is purity, peace——" A heavy sigh stays his words.

"A charming simile," says she softly. "See —see too, how it hastens to its glad eternity —the ocean. And how it helps and waters and gives life to the pretty weeds as it goes. Like the pure life again it makes haste to redeem its time, so as at last to gain its heaven."

"To gain heaven! Either in this life or the next, how few find that."

"Oh! not so few perhaps."

"Who can say? If heaven is so attainable as you believe, who would care to linger here?"

"How sadly you speak," says the girl, turning her eyes to his. "Is life without charm to you? Do you indeed long for death?"

"Oh! no, no, *no!*" exclaims he sharply. A shudder runs through him. He makes an effort to recover himself and fling off the fit of depression that has been troubling him all the morning.

"Life must be sweet to me," says he with a tender smile. "Has it not given me you?"

"Ah! you seemed to be forgetting that just now," says she, with a glance so full of a

pretty coquetry that it sets all his pulses leaping. In time—in time, she may learn to love him; and his heaven will be gained in this world, if it be denied him in the next.

For the moment trouble dies away from him. A blessed forgetfulness steeps all his soul in peace. The dull winter day becomes glorious summer and a wonderful silence falls upon the land—a land that holds but two people; him and her. It seems to him as though here in the very midst of stirring life a long pause has come. Is the world *really* moving? Is there a world at all? Or is this a new dreamy ecstatic state in which thought and memory are mercifully impossible, and only bliss perfected holds sway?

"What is that?" says Evelyn suddenly, who has gone on a little in front, lost in thoughts of her own. A small little brown thing has run out from the bank of the river almost at her feet, and is making a rush for the shelter of some stones farther off. A shrill bark from the terrier that is following close at Mr. Crawford's heels, tells them what it is. The rat seeing her natural enemy, throws her

heart into her race. Terror lends her wings, but too late; the terrier, an implacable wire-haired creature, has seen her, and makes a forward dash.

"Oh! stop him; *don't* let him kill it," cries Evelyn in a voice of agony. The thought that she may see the rat mangled before her eyes, causes her a sick sensation; the training of her youth has made her almost as active as the dog himself, and by a quick effort, she flings herself on her knees before him, and catches his struggling little body in her hands.

Maddened by his disappointment and furious at the loss of his prey, the dog with a shrill yelp turns upon Evelyn, and meeting his vicious little white teeth in the sleeve of her coat, tears savagely at it, uttering fierce growls the while. It takes only a second to reach the flesh within, and as his teeth pinch her, a sharp cry breaks from Evelyn.

"Ah!" says she. There is time for no more. Crawford's fingers have closed like a vice upon the dog's neck, forcing the animal to open its jaws. Dragging him from Evelyn's

arm, he holds him with a violent strength for a moment or two, shaking him backwards and forwards, and then with a fierce imprecation flings him from him into a bunch of withered bracken close by.

"You are not hurt?" cries he, turning his livid face to Evelyn—the eyes glowing, the nostrils dilated and white. "He has not torn you?"

"No—no, it is nothing, nothing. But *the dog!*" exclaims Evelyn in a panting whisper. She shudders convulsively, and shrinks away from him, pointing in a terrified manner to the spot on which the body of the dog is lying. Even as she looks, a last faint quiver runs through the little form that but just this moment was so full of angry life—and now it succumbs to death. "You have killed him!" says she trembling. As she says it she bursts into tears.

"Killed him," repeats Crawford, in a low but awful voice. If pale before, he looks ghastly now, and an expression creeps into his eyes that makes Evelyn feel faint and cold.

"Dead! *dead!*" says he in a dull way, his

gaze fastened on the body of the dog. "*How* did it happen—was it I? . . . In one moment! one little moment! So old, but yet so full of life—and in *one* short moment! I," vehemently, "I never meant it. I swear it. But the blood—who can wipe out the blood——?"

His manner has grown wild and strange. Almost it seems to Evelyn that he is wandering. The girl, filled with a great compassion for him, goes nearer and lays her hand upon his arm. The tears still stand thickly in her eyes, and one or two are running down her cheeks.

"Don't be so unhappy about it," says she, with earnest entreaty. "You did not mean it—of *course* you did not mean it. And that poor little creature—he——" She breaks down here in her small attempt to comfort him. "Oh, I am *sorry* you killed him, I am sorry," cries she passionately. "And it was all my fault—it was to save me you did it."

"I was not accountable," says Mr. Crawford, still in that strange forced way, as though he were pleading his case before a bar of justice—

an unkindly bar. "I knew nothing until it was all over—*a whole day afterwards!* The first time I knew of it was when——" He stops suddenly and looks down at her in a dazed way, but yet with suspicion in his eyes.

"You don't know what you are saying," says she gently. She is frightened by his manner, but nevertheless brave in her determination to help him. "You are taking this too much to heart."

"True! true! I am taking it too much to heart," repeats he with a heavy sigh.

"Forget it—think of me," whispers she, subduing heroically a strong inclination to cry, and compelling herself to think only of him. "See now," smiling tremulously, "I am of some *small* importance in your sight—am I not? When I tell you I am tired—that I would like to go back to the house—to the others——"

"Yes; come." He turns away, following her command, but showing her none of the fond observances that have up to this encompassed her as with a cloud. He walks away in the direction of the house, obeying her

words, but as if forgetful of the fact that she is with him.

"But the dog. You will not leave him? He must be buried," says Evelyn falteringly, whose affection for all dumb animals is part of her life. She has grown up with them —nursed, reared and buried many of them —and has a fondness for them that no time will ever obliterate.

"*Was* he buried?" says Mr. Crawford, looking back at her over his shoulder. "I never heard. Not deep, I think." There is a weird suggestion in his glance, and then, all at once, "Ah!" cries he. It is indeed with a sharp cry that he recovers himself. The veil that has fallen on his mind is now lifted, and once more he is himself.

"I will see to it—to the dog," says he. "Come home now. You look frightened, tired. Evelyn! you have been crying!"

He stops short. This sudden revelation of the fact that he has up to this been blind to her emotion disturbs Evelyn more than all that has gone before.

"You did not know?" says she gravely.

"I was too much upset, too much annoyed with myself," returns he. "You must forgive me that, if you can. But to kill a dog like that, unknowingly, would disturb most men, I fancy. Besides, the fear that he had seriously hurt you distracted me at first. My fears were groundless. There was only the alarm."

"Only that," says she, preferring somehow to keep secret the knowledge of that wounded spot upon her arm. Surely, surely that poor little brute had had too terrible a punishment already. Why add to his great misfortune angry thoughts?

"Well, come now. I'll send a man to see about his burial," says Crawford. He takes Evelyn's hand and leads her forward through the dry wintry ferns and grasses for a yard or so, then, as though some inner spirit is tormenting him, he turns to her and looks with a terrible appeal into her eyes.

"Evelyn! Evelyn! Have pity on me! do not despise, do not fear me! You are my one, *one* hope; do not fail me."

"I shall not fail you," says she with lovely kindness. "You may trust me for ever."

"You are my life, *my all*," says he with deep agitation. "Do you *know* that? I am a silent man, I say little; but if all the feeling of all the world could be poured into one stream, it could not be stronger than the love I bear to you."

He does not attempt to caress her as he speaks. He stands indeed rather back from her, with one of her hands clasped closely between both of his.

"I am glad you love me," says she very sadly. Alas; alas! for that other love that *might* have been!

"And in spite of all—of everything—you will still trust me? You will give yourself to me? You do not shrink from me?" asks he, lifting her hand and pressing it feverishly against his lips. "Oh, Evelyn, do not forsake me."

"Have I not promised you?" says she reproachfully. "Is my word so light a thing?"

"But to chain a bright life such as yours to one so altogether unhappy——"

"Are you unhappy? I have often thought

it," says she gently. "And I have thought, too, that if I can help you to think less about your trouble, I may be of some small use to you. But," she pauses nervously, and then looks straight at him, "why are you unhappy?"

"I might deceive you," says he quietly, after a full minute has gone by, "but I prefer not to do so. I confess honestly that there is one past trouble in my life that is always remembered by me—and with sore distress. A trouble that I believe will never be forgotten by me. I cannot tell you what it is. I cannot confide it to you or any living being. If it daunts you now, Evelyn, say so."

"But that is so vague," says she faintly,

"It must always be vague. It is my own trouble. It has nothing to do with any living man or woman. It has nothing to do with any woman, living or dead. It shall have nothing to do with my love, my *adoration* of you—with my determination to lay my life, such as it is, at your feet, to make a football of it, if you will."

"I shall not do that," says she.

"No, you are not of that sort. But still I resign myself absolutely to your will; it is all I can do."

"Why do you not say that you have money —that you can shower *that* upon me?" says she, with a little burst of feeling.

"Because you are *you!* Don't I know how little weight sheer dross would have with you? Don't I know, too, that you are willing to marry me without love because it will be for the good of your uncle, and——"

"He does not know that," interrupts she quickly; "be careful that he never does. And, after all, is not that marrying you for the love of money?"

Her tone has grown very sorrowful.

"No. To desire money for oneself, and to desire it for another, are two different phases of feeling. One is sordid, the other is noble. I fear—I *fear*," says he, "so strong is my love for you, that I should accept your sacrifice of yourself, even though I knew the first feeling to be really yours. As it is——"

"Yes?" with grave question.

"Do not ask me to lay bare my heart,"

says he in a low tone. "It is too full—of you!"

"Oh, do not think too much of me," says the girl, her own heart aching. "You will only be disappointed; you give so much, I am giving so little. It—it troubles me that you should love me so greatly."

"Let nothing trouble you. Think always that I consider myself blessed above measure in that you have consented to give me your friendship and to let me give you my love."

"A poor bargain," with a faint smile.

"A rich one, *I* think. Ah! here are the others. Would you rather not see them?" turning anxiously to her. "Would you rather go into the house? You have been distressed. I will explain."

"No;" she shakes her head; a little nervous smile parts her lips; "there are gossips in these days," says she. "We will give them no occasion of falling foul of us. If I left you now in full view of them, they might say I had learned something to your disadvantage during our walk. You see?"

"I see," says he, his eyes on the ground.

Slowly they advance towards the group assembled under the southern wall of the beautiful old house.

CHAPTER III.

It is a very picturesque group. The day, although dull, is not cold, and the women, sitting here and there, or walking up and down the terraces in their furs and laces, with here and there a touch of crimson to relieve the darkness of their costumes, make a charming picture against the glistening background of the trailing ivy, that everlasting garment of old winter. Here cut close against the walls, and there hanging in all its native luxuriance from the towers and battlements, it seems ever bent on clothing the chilly old king in a verdure green as summer hath it, in spite of the frosts and snows.

Mrs. Wylding-Weekes has been playing her eternal banjo, and singing to it apparently, though only the ceaseless, monotonous sound of its tum-tum-tum comes to Evelyn and Mr. Crawford as they draw near.

Evidently it has been an Anglo-negro melody of the very latest fashion, and probably of a very pronounced type, as quite a burst of applause breaks from the male court that, as usual, has formed itself round Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, as it comes to a termination. She herself seems to be dying with laughter, whilst afar off, in the shade of a gum tree, Mr. Wylding-Weekes may be seen aglow with wrath subdued.

"Give you another?" asks Mrs. Wylding-Weekes gaily, with a disgracefully ill-concealed glance towards her husband and a nudge to Batty Blount. "*Bonâ fide this* time! No nonsense about it! Straight from Kentuck. The real article—warranted to wear and to wash. Who's for it? *Say!*"

A dozen hands go up at once, all with the manly shirt-cuff at the end of them. Whereupon she gives them, with immense spirit, a truly terrible ditty that has a good deal to do with the wily opossum.

"An opossum up a gum tree,
Up he go,
Up he go."

It is unpardonable. The allusion to the gum tree over there, with Mr. Wylding-Weekes not exactly up it, but distinctly raging beneath it, is only too apparent.

"I really wish she *wouldn't*," says Evelyn nervously, in a low aside to Mr. Crawford, who is looking distressed. Every one is wishing that, except the reckless few; but all the wishing is of no avail.

"It is a pity," says Mr. Crawford gravely.

To Evelyn it seems that it is almost more than that; but she is in a specially depressed mood in which all unpleasant things take alarmingly huge proportions.

The killing of that dog is still fresh to her. The scene refuses to be laid, and repeats itself over and over before her imagination. And Mr. Crawford's face! That cruel light in his eyes as he had held the poor little brute. With what an awful tenacity he had held—and *choked it!*

And that he—*he* should have been the hero of this sorry affair. That is the real mystery that troubles her. Other men in their wrath might have done it, but that he should have

done it disturbs her. Was there ever man so kind, so calm, so gentle almost to melancholy? Yet his rage had been strange, horrible. And the regret—that came too late—surely that had been as strange, as exaggerated as the rage itself.

How was it with him? What curious nature had she lit upon thus early in her young journey through life? Always she can see before her those fierce eyes and the fiercer clutch of the fingers round the dog's throat; and as she thinks of it, she shrinks afresh from him with a strong repugnance.

To blame herself a moment later! For with the fear of him there is always present with her a pity for him, a pity that is divine.

"What a delicious old place this is, Mr. Crawford," says Marian Vandeleur, with a view to getting rid of Mrs. Wylding-Weekes and her outrageous conduct.

"Yes, isn't it?" says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes promptly, who has always something to say about every topic under the sun. "Just like the old barracks one reads of. That thing of

Tennyson's, don't you know, eh? The Moated Grange—what?"

"An excellent name. A most appropriate one," says Crawford courteously, in that slow way of his, his eyes on the ground. He smiles as he speaks, but to his heart he shows a different face. She had hit upon a truth, this silly woman. Despair lay there, in that old moated grange of poetry; despair lies *here!*

"I hardly think so," says Miss Vandeleur gently; "very inappropriate surely. It is a sunny old place, with no suspicion of that ideal gloom about it, to which Mrs. Wylding-Weekes alludes."

"Things are not always on the surface," says Crawford lightly, yet toying, as he always will, with the remorseful melancholy at his heart. "For all we may know, in this more real spot a soul may lie panting for liberty."

"How ungallant," cries Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with her shrill cackle and her usual delicacy; "'pon my word, for a freshly-engaged man, *that* isn't bad. Panting so soon for liberty. Evelyn, are you going to stand that?"

"One must envy you your imagination; it is very lively," says Mr. Crawford with exquisite sweetness. There is not the smallest tinge of either embarrassment or resentment in his tone. "But indeed I was but calling on my own imagination, when I supposed there might be a discontented spirit in this grange. So you see I have a little of that charm, of which just now I was envious."

"Oh! that's all very fine," says Mrs. Wylding-Weekes, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "But I half think you meant it. I've studied you, you know, and I believe you dearly love to pose—to show yourself off—as a social martyr, without exactly going into the reason of it."

"Have you seen the winter-houses? They are charming," says Sir Bertram Stamer at this moment, addressing Mrs. Wylding-Weekes with *empressement*. "No? May I accompany you?"

"You mean that I am not behaving myself properly and that I ought to be removed," replies that indiscreet matron, without hesitation. "Well, lead on. I'm not often favoured

by an attention from you. I feel I have been putting my foot in it in earnest, when *you* come to the rescue. Mr. Crawford"—looking back at him with a beaming smile—"if I've sinned forgive me, and don't let any one take away my character whilst I'm absent."

"You can't take away what you can't lay hold of," says Mrs. Coventry, with a little sarcastic glance at Lady Stamer.

"A most improper person," says Lady Stamer severely. "*When* is she to be dropped? that is what I want to know."

"Never! She is the ingredient that makes the social pudding eatable. You would condemn her to penal servitude for life. *I* should present her with a gold medal."

"But why?" asks Mrs. Vaudrey, who has come up, and who is looking very cold in a thin dolman that had done duty all last summer. She is puzzled, and divided in opinion between her longing to denounce Mrs. Wylding-Weekes for her late suggestion that Crawford could be unhappy (when engaged to such a dear girl as Evelyn), and the sneaking

affection she entertains for that most impossible if kind-hearted coquette.

"Have I not said it? Because she is the salt that savours our dull corner of the earth; the naughty glass of brandy that flavours our pudding, but to which all virtuous people close their eyes; the little touch of leaven that makes our barm rise."

"Or our venoms," says Mrs. Vaudrey, quite neatly for *her*.

"How animated you all look," says Mr. Crawford, approaching them at this moment. "So more than kind of you on this colourless day. Madame Iscar is going to sing now, I think" (a fresh celebrity he has got down from London to assist them in getting rid of their day). "Don't hurry; but in a minute or two, if any of you care for singing, I think she will please you."

"We all adore it," says Lady Stamer, who is specially gracious to him on every occasion, not to say grateful. Has he not taken a worry off her mind, and left an unwise son without the means of continuing on in his folly?

"Yet to leave this charming view is indeed

a compliment to Madame Iscar," says Miss Vandeleur. "What pleasure can lie even in an ordinary winter day. No snow, no ice; a heavy sky; leafless trees, if one gets beyond the shrubberies, and in spite of all that there is a nameless charm that holds me out of doors when I feel I ought to be within. You feel it, Evelyn?"

Miss D'Arcy has been so singularly silent, that her friend's heart grows afraid for her. And what are those dark circles under her eyes? Has she been crying? Does crying mean regret? And if so, what of this news that bears upon to-morrow? Has Evelyn heard it yet?

"I like winter," says Evelyn impassively, "and I like this place. How quiet it is. Like death!"

"Oh, no!" says Miss Vandeleur, a good deal shocked. "The prettiest place! Like a calm life rather."

"Like death, *I* think," with a gentle persistency. Mr. Crawford has moved away and is talking to Mrs. Vaudrey, but now he is coming back to the girls again over the short

shaven grass. He has compelled himself to be undemonstrative, but to stay away from Evelyn for long is impossible to him.

"It has the quiet of death surely," says Evelyn, "and all its other charms." Then with a soft glance at her friend, "There is no place for memory here."

"We were talking about this place. It pleases Evelyn," says Miss Vandeleur, as Crawford joins them. Her own heart revolts against this marriage; but if it is to be—if Evelyn has made up her mind to it—surely it is a friend's part to make the thorny path less thorny for her.

"It does," says Evelyn, looking kindly up at him. "The very walls awake my admiration. How clothed they are, how rich with growing things. They in themselves are a beauty."

"I am glad you like them; I confess that I myself hold them in great respect," says Mr. Crawford, giving Evelyn a swift full glance, that though brief is so replete with passionate life and love that Marian's heart dies within her. "Walls are like children," goes on Mr. Crawford, in his calm thoughtful way. "When

first born they are naked, and then come the kindly mosses and grasses, covering them day by day, year by year, until in their old age they are altogether decent, clothed with an excellent garment of green, and grey lichens, and with the ivy that covers so many multitudes of sins."

"Oh, the ivy; that is a true friend to nature," says Marian.

"Why? It only hides—and hides—and hides," says Evelyn petulantly.

"Well, is that not something?"

"No. Why should there be anything to hide?" more petulantly still. "Is not nature perfect?"

"But the walls are man's work, and man is not perfect."

"Then it is *man* the ivy covers," says Evelyn quickly. She turns to Crawford with a restless smile. "You hear that aspersion upon your sex?" says she. "Have you no word to defend yourself? What is it *you* would hide?"

It is a random shot, but it tells. Crawford, though outwardly unmoved, feels his courage

forsake him. At this moment Mr. Blount, standing on the highest step of the balcony that leads into the reception rooms, calls aloud to them. It is a departure for Mr. Blount, who, as an unvarying rule, always turns up just when he is *not* wanted. Just now he is a haven of refuge to Crawford.

"I say, good people, she's going to begin," roars he genially, alluding presumably to the prima donna within. "Aren't you going to patronize her? She's looking very black, Crawford. It's my opinion she expects you to see her through, eh?"

"We're coming," says Mr. Crawford equably.

CHAPTER IV.

Madame Iscar has excelled herself, has received with a fat graciousness all the smiles and pretty words showered upon her, has even been good enough to make them a present of a song not in the agreement, has expressed herself charmed with the Grange and its master and his friends, and abstains from even a single yawn until the carriage doors have closed upon her and she is safely started up the avenue on her way to the 4.30 train that will carry her back to her beloved London and far from these estimable but intolerable country folk, who are just now congratulating themselves secretly, if not openly, on their good manners and the kindly fashion in which they have consented *for once* to receive a public singer as though she had been one of themselves. "Quite a common person—no family—not at all in *our* set; a person, you know, who—well *really*——"

No doubt—they whisper confidentially, with a glow of generosity at their hearts—she must have been greatly flattered by her reception. They had not made the *slightest* difference with her; had sat quite close to her several times. And one of them had given her a rose. She had been *so* pleased, poor thing; had said quite lovely things about it. Of course it was a day she would never forget—this mingling on terms of equality with the County.

Poor County!

Now that she has at last been compelled to "*tear* herself away" (that is how they look at it), they rise themselves, and draw into little groups and order their carriages.

Evelyn happens to form one of them, with Mrs. Coventry, two or three other people in the neighbourhood, Marian, and Mrs. Vaudrey. Mr. Blount is hovering on its outskirts, conducting a most able skirmish with one of the D'Arcy children.

"We must be going, really. It is awfully late!" says an ethereal-looking young woman, who is beginning to love the thought of her dinner—generally a hearty one—and to hate

the thought of the long drive that lies between her and it.

"Yes. The carriages are ordered. You won't have to be hungry *much* longer," says Mrs. Coventry, who knows everything about everybody, and is generally nasty all round.

"I'm never hungry," says the ethereal young woman, with a wondering stare from her large sad eyes.

"Well, my dear, then you shouldn't *look* it," says Mrs. Coventry, tapping her playfully with her fan. "Eat up—eat up all you can lay your hands on, and perhaps Providence will be good to you and remove the signs of emaciation that are at present disfiguring you."

As emaciation is the one thing on which the ethereal one prides herself, she naturally receives this with resentment.

"I am as Heaven made me," says she with deep solemnity.

"Or Mother Nature," suggests Mrs. Coventry, unabashed.

"One should always fix one's eyes upon

the highest point," says the thin young woman ecstatically.

"That's what *I* think," says Mr. Blount, who—having reduced the youngest D'Arcy child to tears, and having restored him to tranquillity by half-a-crown—is now as gay as a lark. "Fix your weather eye on the top of Mont Blanc, for example—from a convenient site—keeping your head up all the time, and there you are, you know! You've felt you've done it, after half an hour's hard gazing. You've got through the slips, the stumbles—the hairbreadth escapes—the all but certain death, and yet you're safe in wind and limb at the end of it. Idiots go up and get killed. *You* don't, and——"

"No, *you* don't," says Mrs. Coventry drily.

Miss Vandeleur laughs a little.

"I'm afraid for once you are at fault, Mrs. Coventry," says she. "As it is so rare an occasion," with irrepressible maliciousness, "you may forgive it. Mr. Blount is an accomplished Alpine climber."

"Now, my dear Marian, no taradiddles," says Mr. Blount severely. "I am entirely

against that kind of thing. Stick to the moral path, the *safe* path—in this case, odd to say, the lowest one—and you'll certainly have your reward. The *im*-moral path—odd again—is the one that leads upwards in this instance. It has been censured many a time, and very justly. Suicide has been put down by law. I entirely agree with Mrs. Marjoribanks," with a glance at the ethereal young woman. "Keep your *eye* upon the highest point by all means, but keep your foot off it."

"How frivolous you are," Mrs. Marjoribanks, very ungratefully it must be acknowledged.

Mrs. Coventry, annoyed by her late mistake, and feeling therefore venomous, looks round her with a view to hurting somebody. Her small eyes fall on Evelyn, who is looking a little pale and tired. Does she know? Has she heard? At all events it will be amusing to see how she will take it.

"How delightfully that woman Iscar sang," says she. "A pity Captain Stamer missed her. He is to be home to-morrow I hear. A day earlier and he would have been here."

She is looking straight at Evelyn, so directly, indeed, as almost to invite the regard of the others to the girl, who is standing looking back at her, a strange shocked look upon her face. It is momentary, however. Nobody but the malicious speaker has seen it, though Marian has somehow felt it, and so has Mr. Blount, who is a strange mixture of sense and nonsense, but who, through all, carries the kindliest heart.

"I expect he has heard her a hundred times," says he. "She's just returned from a tour in Ireland. Dublin raved about her; and Stamer likes music. There's the colonel calling you, Evelyn. Oh! he's just gone past the window now. Come; I'll take you to him."

He hurries the girl away, without giving her time to demur, down the long room into the open air and to the spot indicated where the colonel had certainly *not* been.

"Hah!" says Mrs. Coventry. "There is more in Mr. Blount than one would imagine from his exceedingly vacuous countenance and inane conversation. I'm afraid my un-

fortunate remark about Captain Stamer's sudden return upset Miss D'Arcy."

"Why should it?" says Marian, regarding her with intense and cold disdain. She had heard of Eaton's home-coming an hour ago, and has been lost in miserable uncertainty as to how best to make it known to Evelyn. To have had it thus sprung upon her, and intentionally, is intolerable.

"Don't you think she was a little *épris* there? And perhaps he a little too—Lady Stamer is anything but overjoyed at his unexpected home-coming," she laughs with thorough enjoyment. "I fancy this engagement with our good host is hardly to Miss D'Arcy's entire liking."

"And imagining all this, you still sped your shaft," says Miss Vandeleur with a contempt so unrestrained that the other, in spite of herself, colours hotly.

"I merely mentioned a passing fact. I do not feel myself called upon to regulate my conversation according to the fancies of my associates," says she, with ill-suppressed annoyance.

"There is such a thing as delicacy!" says Miss Vandeleur, with a touch of passionate reproach. A second later she knows she has gone too far, but for once in her gentle life she hardly regrets it.

"And you?" says Mrs. Coventry. "Do you always remember? My dear girl, let me entreat you to give up posing. It never tells. Tack on to it another letter and it becomes prosing. Bores are the pariahs of society. Don't classify yourself with them, I implore you—for your own sake, merely."

"You are very good," says Marian calmly.

"As for Miss D'Arcy, if I insinuated that she is not altogether madly in love with her *fiancé*—was it so great a crime?"

"That was not the crime."

"Did she never then give a thought to Eaton Stamer?"

"Oh! not at all—not at all," cries Mrs. Vaudrey, kind, but blind soul, striking into the discussion with great energy. "Never anything but friends, you know. Friends all their lives. Grew up together almost. And we all know that such early friendships rarely

ripen into love affairs. It's a well-known thing, isn't it, Marian?"

"Yes," says Marian sturdily, though her heart is bleeding for her friend.

"I think there is nothing so sweet as that old lore," says Mrs. Coventry, with an affectation of admiration that enrages Marian—"that firm belief in the undeviating lines here and there that are supposed to move the world. I wish I had not outlived them; but I'm too old now, I'm afraid, to correct my follies. How lovely it is to be always young," with a smile at poor Mrs. Vaudrey, who is looking anything but juvenile in her faded bonnet and worn gown; "to be able to cling to the traditions of one's youth as you can."

"I'm clinging to nothing," says Mrs. Vaudrey stoutly. "I'm only saying that I don't believe Evelyn ever cared for Eaton Stamer in the way you think she did."

"Ah," says Mrs. Coventry, "you are farther advanced in your opinions than Miss Vandeleur. She wavers, I think. Do you believe, Miss Vandeleur, that boys and girls

who grow up together are *always* bound to hate each other?"

"I do so dislike this sort of discussion where one's friends come in," says Miss Vandeleur with dignity. "And so I am sure does Mrs. Vaudrey. We both are very fond of Evelyn D'Arcy. And——"

"And so am I," says Mrs. Marjoribanks with promptitude, and a sudden return to naturalness stirred by that late attack on her of Mrs. Coventry's. "I think her a perfectly sweet little thing, and I think it a positive cruelty that any one should say a word against her."

"It is a crusade," says Mrs. Coventry pleasantly. "I should like to join it. *Who* has been saying anything against her? Pray let me into the secret that I too may help to annihilate them."

Nobody answers; there ensues indeed a rather awkward silence that is broken presently by a suspicion rather than by a knowledge of some disturbance going on in the hall outside.

"What can be the matter?" says Mrs. Vaudrey nervously. "Nothing on fire. Eh?"

CHAPTER V.

Well! nothing of any great importance! Mr. Wylding-Weekes *only*! But as he explodes about once a week regularly, no one gives much heed to his catherine wheels.

It is the usual thing! There has been some unpleasantness; Mr. Wylding-Weekes has discovered Mrs. Wylding-Weekes in one of the winter houses with a *man* at her feet! Kissing her hands or doing something or other distinctly unpleasant to a jealous husband. Nothing quite transpires, but that a *dénouement* has been reached is beyond question!

Mr. Wylding-Weekes is making a horrid fuss! He always does. Mrs. Wylding-Weekes is standing by, doing the social martyr to perfection. He and she are now in the hall awaiting the arrival of their carriage. The "man" is out of view! very cleverly!

The unwise have crowded on to the doorstep

with the intention of seeing the whole thing through—the wise have held themselves aloof. Some people are laughing. Some are indignant. It is always like this with the Wylding-Weekes. And they themselves never seem to care "a little hang," as Mr. Blount puts it poetically, *what* people think of them.

There is a whisper going abroad that it was Sir Bertram who had been the delinquent on this occasion. The lazy Sir Bertram—the one so difficult to move at any time. The idea gives a zest to the entertainment—a part of the day's festivities not provided by Mr. Crawford.

Sir Bertram, it appears, had been with her—had taken her to the gardens—had made quite a point of taking her there. *There*, where nobody else had cared to venture. There is a second story afloat that drags into it a new man from the barracks at Elton. He had arrived there about a week ago, and Mrs. Wylding-Weekes liked new men.

It is a small blot on the general conviviality, and is therefore to be regretted, but people have grown so accustomed to the little ways

of the Wylding-Weekes and to their eccentricities that not much attention after all is given to it. Their carriage comes round to the door. The injured husband helps his wife into it with an air of indignant dignity that sits very funnily upon his small lean person; the wife enters it with a resigned adieu to her host and a swift sidelong glance full of suppressed merriment at some one in the crowd, and presently the Wylding-Weekes are not only out of sight, but out of mind until the next time.

"What a little fool!" says Sir Bertram, marching straight up to Marian and speaking of the troublesome person who has just disappeared up the avenue beside a raging spouse. Has he heard that his name has been associated with hers?

"I quite like her, you mustn't abuse her to me," says Miss Vandeleur coldly.

"Oh! so do I for the matter of that. There's more folly than harm in her; but still——"

"That is quite true. And I prefer to hear you taking her part, however lamely."

"Why?" raising his brows.

"It is the more generous thing surely."

"I can't see why I'm bound to be generous to Mrs. Wylding-Weekes—*specially*. If you mean that I should defend the entire sex, all I can say is that I don't feel equal to the task."

"Then don't undertake it. Some of us do not require it."

"You for example?" flinging away his cigar and folding his arms behind him. "You needn't read me a lecture on that. I know you to be not only irreproachable, but unapproachable. Now Mrs. Wylding-Weekes——"

"Is *she* approachable?" with a faint disdain.

"I really don't know. She can be civil certainly. And that's always something."

"Something! A great deal I think."

"Do you? you might practise what you preach, then."

"Do you mean that I am always *uncivil?*"

"To me, yes. To others—I don't know what you are to others."

"You are unjust," says she with a slight touch of vehemence.

"Well, you're uncivil now, aren't you?

And unjust into the bargain. You are accusing me of all sorts of things. Don't deny it—I can read you quite plainly."

"I was going to deny nothing. And how am I unjust? Is there nothing of which you may be accused?"

"What a leading question, and what a tremendous one. Even you, immaculate as you are, is there nothing of which you might be accused?"

"You play with the question, and in so doing you give a truthful answer to it."

"You condemn me then—unheard?"

"Nonsense; *I* am not your judge."

"Pardon me. You have constituted yourself as such. I bow before you. I submit myself—but above all things I claim justice. Now—your indictment. Let me know of what you deem me guilty. I don't desire a *résumé* of all the vices of which you believe me guilty, but just this last particular one."

"Your vices I know nothing of—and—they are nothing to me."

"Nor my virtues either, I suppose—believing me generously to have one or two."

"I hope you have more than that."

"But hope is so deceitful. Is that what you would say?" He laughs a little. "Well," seating himself on the parapet near, that overlooks the garden, "I'll tell you the hard thought that is in your mind for me to-day. You heard Wylding-Weekes had found me flirting with his wife in one of the houses."

"Why can't you leave that silly little creature alone?" cries she, flashing round at him. "You don't care for her—you never could. She is not suited to you, or you to her, and yet——"

"I can take the trouble to kiss her hand, or her foot—or—I really forget which it was."

"It is unworthy of you!" says she with some vehemence. She turns aside and pulls away the Chantilly laces at her throat as though they are stifling her.

"It might be, if I ever *had* taken that trouble. But I assure you I did not go to the gardens with Mrs. Wylding-Weekes at all. On our way there—and I offered to show the houses to her merely to oblige your friend Miss D'Arcy—we fortunately fell in with that

Deptford—new man—over there, you know," pointing to where presumably the barracks in the next town lies. "And he took her off my hands. I had the mortification of seeing that she was unfeignedly glad to get rid of me. She quite fawned on Deptford with a view to throwing me over; the back seat was undoubtedly mine, so after a decent excuse or two, I beat an ignominious retreat."

A long silence.

"Well!" says he at last in an unmistakably triumphant tone. If he had hoped that he had scored one he is lamentably mistaken; Miss Vandeleur turns her face to his, but instead of contrition he is compelled to read indignation in her eyes.

"And you knew what I meant all along. And never told me. And you let me say all sorts of things to you. You let me accuse you—when you knew a word would have changed all. You wilfully put me in the wrong! Oh, it was shameful of you."

"Good heavens! Am I still the offending party? I had believed myself the injured one, and now——"

"What on earth can be keeping the carriage?" says Miss Vandeleur, sweeping past him as though he is invisible.

Her mood changes when a few minutes later she meets Evelyn, who is just leaving with the colonel and Mrs. D'Arcy. A very pale Evelyn—but quite composed now, and calm and indifferent—too indifferent, thinks Marian.

"Good-bye, Evelyn." She takes the girl's hand and holds it closely. "Tell me," rather nervously—a little unsettled by Evelyn's clear steady gaze. "To-morrow—will you come to me? or shall I—would you like me to come to you?"

"Not to-morrow," says Evelyn, shaking her head with quite an every-day smile. "I am going to give myself a delightful day to-morrow. I have accepted an invitation from myself, and I must not break it. Bad manners not permissible. It is quite a royal mandate that has been sent me, I dare not disobey. I am going for a long—long—long walk into the leafless woods."

"A dreary invitation surely," with a wist-

ful glance at her. The girl's gaiety, though well done and seemingly unforced, does not deceive her. "You will take Jimmy with you, or one of the children—or," hesitating, "me; I should like to go."

"How can I take you?" laughing. "The invitation is for myself alone; I should not presume to bring even the dearest friend I have—and that," with a little playful pressure on her arm, "is you. No; to-morrow is given away."

"Well," says Miss Vandeleur with a sigh. Some other words might have escaped her, but the determined smile on Evelyn's lips checks her. "Good-bye," says she again.

CHAPTER VI.

Surely there never dawned a day so dull as this. Grey sky, brown earth and naked trees. No stir of life anywhere.

Evelyn, going for that "long, long, long walk" to which she is self-invited, and to which she hurries lest any small duty amongst the daily round of them may arise and call on her to remain at home, finds herself at about noontide entering the dark woods of Grange.

There is no fear that she will meet its master here; no fear that she will meet—anybody. It is the most secluded, the least cared for part that she has chosen, in which to while away this most hateful of all days. She had been, if quiet, entirely cheerful all the morning, and no one had guessed at the perfect frenzy of impatience that was hers, until the gate of Firgrove had closed behind

her, and she found herself comparatively lost in the dim recesses of the solitary wood.

It is a melancholy spot at the best of times, this corner of Grange; even in the hot and glowing summer, shadows linger here; no bursts of sunlight darting through the heavy trees make golden patches on the sward beneath; a sodden sward, where vegetation grows but slowly, and always with a dying life in it. To-day it is inexpressibly dreary; deserted—lonely—hopeless—in very unison with her own thoughts and fancies.

> "Here weep the dews and winds of winter blow;
> The soft breeze rustles in the bending grass;
> The cold rain falls here, and the drifting snow—
> But tears fall not, nor lovers' footsteps pass."

Somewhere in the distance the mad and mournful roar of the cataract may be heard, swollen by last week's rains. Its noisy tumult seems to Evelyn full of angry pain, full of despairing passion, full of revolt.

The river down below is swollen too, and now runs flush with its banks. It runs with

her thoughts, she tells herself, standing on a high knoll and gazing down on it with large sad eyes. *How* it rushes! with what an eager hurry, as if to get rid of itself and fling itself for all time into its ocean of eternity! Oh! that she too might so swiftly and so easily gain the end of all things—that death from which so many shrink, and which after all is the kindest friend we have.

How cold the river looks! How full of purpose. In what a mad haste to leave its past behind it. Has it so hated then its shallows farther up, and the wide delicate reaches, where the rushes show their brown heads above the water, close to the bank. How calm a life it must have had all through the smiling summer; so calm that now when winter is upon it, and cruel rains and drifting snows have descended on it, and proved too much for it, it has risen in protest, and gathering together all its strength, has given up hope, and seeks oblivion only in the wide sea beyond that bar.

Poor river! Its troubles have been too much for it! It seems to have lost all con-

trol over itself. And how dark, how deep it is.

> "Deep as love
> Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
> O death in life, the days that are no more."

The words ring in her ears! "The days that are no more!" That *have* been, but can never be again. They are done with—cast aside—dead. "Death in Life!" Yet she must go on living. Not only that, but she must learn to adapt her ways to her husband's ways. She must learn to think of him, and him only.

Well! Why not? why not? Is he not worthy of all thought? Many women have been condemned to marry men despicable in their eyes. But for her all that is different. With a strong determination she calls to light Crawford's gentle air, his deeds of charity, so unostentatiously displayed. His kindness. His goodness to the children who are to her as brothers and as sisters. His loving care for her. The extreme humbleness that characterizes his every action. His unmistakable disregard for the wealth

that makes him without his will a person of importance. Do not all these things make him mightier than his fellows? Surely she is a fortunate girl, that one so faultless should have chosen her from out the whole wide world to love and cherish.

She has worked herself, as she hopes and believes, into a proper frame of mind; she has brought the glow of admiration to her cheek; she seems to herself filled with an honest appreciation of Mr. Crawford's excellences, and——

And all at once she finds herself where she began. Oh! Mother Nature, who shall conquer thee! In a flash as it were the face of Eaton Stamer rises before her, ill-tempered, frowning, as when last she saw it, but to her, alas! the dearest face on earth.

She covers her eyes with her hands, and presses her fingers against them despairingly, as though bent on killing that sweet forbidden memory.

A faint rustle in the straggling grasses—a stir in the dried leaves! Her hands fall to her sides, and she finds herself looking at the

real Eaton—the original of the vision that has been tormenting her. *Is* he real? or a fresh torture? Oh! *how* has he found his way here—here of all places where she believed herself secure?

It is hardly the Eaton of her everyday life. What has happened to him? He is pale, haggard, stern.

"Well!" says he thrusting aside a bramble with a force hardly necessary, and coming straight up to her.

A horrible fear that she is going to faint, has for the moment smitten her; she recovers herself, however, and hardly knowing what she does, goes mechanically forward and holds out her hand to him in ordinary greeting. He flings it aside.

"What's this you've done?" demands he roughly.

"I don't understand," returns she faintly, though she is growing more herself already; that very roughness of his has helped to restore her courage. Her late weakness, however, is exemplified by her answer to his attack. It has left him an open road.

"Don't you?" says he vehemently. "Then I'll explain it to you. You have engaged yourself to—you have promised to marry—a man for whom you entertain no smallest spark of affection. You have flung aside all honour, all honesty, all womanliness, and for the sake of the filthy dross of this life have consented to sacrifice yourself, soul and body!"

"Surely—*surely* you don't know what you are saying," says she, striving to be calm, whilst carried away by the storm of his passion. "You must be *mad* to talk to me like this! Why should you judge me so? Why think so vilely of me? I am not angry, Eaton," her right hand tightening convulsively in a fold of her gown—her breath coming with difficulty. "You are not quite yourself to-day, are you?"

"No—not quite," says he. "I am glad you understand so much at least."

"Well, it is difficult to understand," answers she coldly, a long heavy sigh having given her some relief. "Why should I not marry Mr. Crawford—or any one else I choose?"

"Confine yourself to Mr. Crawford, please.

You have no right to marry him, at all events."

"No?" says she; "and why?"

"We both know that. The answer to it is as well known to you as to me. In that we agree if we have nothing else in common."

"I never guessed a riddle in my life," says she with a pale smile.

"Must I explain again, then?—go over the old ground? You *used* not to be so dull, but if——"

"No, no," putting up a warning hand. "If you would repeat yourself, I refuse to hear. And"—turning upon him with a sudden glow of anger—"what do you mean by coming here to-day and talking to me like this? What are you to me, or I to you? Are you my conscience?"

"I don't know what I am to you, but I know what you are to me, and you—know it too."

"I know nothing," says she icily. The memory of that last day when he had come to her, and had spent his last hours in trivial altercation, comes to her and sustains her.

He *might* have spoken and he didn't. "You come here to-day upbraiding me. For what? For promising to marry the kindest, gentlest man I have ever known!" A little sob chokes her for a moment, but she conquers it. "What right have *you* to censure me, even were censure due?"

"The one great right of all. I love you!" He is very pale as he says this, but he makes no movement towards her. There is passion in his gaze, but unconquerable resentment too.

"Ah! you should have said that sooner," cries she with a violent laugh. A thrill of exquisite pain is rendering every limb almost lifeless, but the brain endures. "You are too late now. And do you think I will believe you?" cries she, taking a fierce step forward. "Now—*now* to believe you. Oh, no, no, *no!*" She pauses and passes her hand languidly across her brow; the first violence of her grief is past. "You should have said that sooner, or left it alone altogether," says she, with a suggestion of numbness. "I don't believe it now. I don't indeed. There was

so *much* time before, and yet——" she sighs. "You did not think of me when I was free, and now—now you come here to annoy—to insult me."

"To insult you, Evelyn? If the truth is an insult it lies before you. But why should it be? As for your suggestion that I did not think of you——" he breaks off suddenly as if trying to control himself. "Well, I leave that to yourself."

"Then I refuse to have it so left," cries she passionately. "You—you speak of your love for me, and yet on that day on which we parted, when you knew you were going away for weeks and weeks, what did you say of love *then?* You came, you saw me lying ill and in pain, and how did you treat me? Not one word of love, or sympathy even. You were cold, cruel, indifferent! You knew you were parting from me for a long, long time; surely that was a time to say all that might be in one's heart, but *you*—said nothing. Nothing was there, perhaps. And now—now when I am betrothed to another man, you come back, and—— How"—breaking

off abruptly, and regarding him with scornful eyes—"how am I to think of it all?"

"You pretend to blame me, yet am I to be blamed?" says he. "That day—how could I say what I had come to say? Believe me or not as you will, but I started that morning with but one desire in my heart—to ask you to be my wife!"

"I won't believe you!" cries she sharply, wincing as if from a blow.

"Of course you won't believe me—that is part of the scheme," says he rudely. "But it *is* so, for all that. I was going away. I felt as if I could not go until I had a word from you, and when I came, how was it with you? In tears for Crawford!" bitterly. "I say one word against that immaculate person, and behold you up in arms for Crawford. It was Crawford, Crawford, Crawford all through! I could not speak, and yet," with rising reproach that is so full of despair as to make it eloquent, "you must have known! You *did* know; and knowing, you deliberately deceived me!"

"Take care!" says she slowly, with a dull

but heavy concentration. "One can go too far."

"*You* have," says he recklessly. "And for the rest, I don't care how far I go. I'll have it out with you now and be done with it. For me there are no consequences—our friendship, such as it was, ends to-day."

"You are a coward," says she breathlessly. "You think only of yourself. Your own feelings are all that concern you."

"Why not?" says he, with a strange smile. "*My* feelings are the only ones concerned in this affair. As for you—you have none!"

Evelyn, raising her large eyes, for the first time to-day, looks steadily at him.

CHAPTER VII.

"You are wrong," says she gently.

"Am I? I think not. It is a popular delusion that one can't live without a heart—the vital organ, you know—the one thing necessary to life—but that is all mere folly! You haven't a heart of even the poorest description, yet you get through the world as well—oh! *better*—than most of us."

"You throw yourself away," says she icily, yet smiling all the time. "You are apparently a thought-reader before whom the rest of that clever lot might well quail. How deeply you must have studied me to understand me so entirely! In truth, I envy you your prescience."

"Well, I don't envy *you!*" says he ruthlessly. "You would make light of my accusations, but——. *Come*, now, Evelyn!" advancing towards her, and grasping her hand

with a rude determination, and compelling her body—although not her eyes—to face his. "To get back to our first argument. You will swear to your verity of soul, won't you? And yet on that last day of ours, to which you cling as being damnatory evidence against me—what of that day? Did you not then and there declare to me that you would never marry Crawford?"

"*I* said that?"

"You, and no other. Do you think I am likely to forget? Why, I built on that the Spanish castle that has failed me. On that day I said to you I was convinced you would never marry Crawford, and you—you said ——. Pshaw," impatiently, "I forget the exact words, but at all events, I remember only too clearly what you *meant*. I said," pausing as if to force remembrance, "that I believed you would not marry him, and you," pausing again, "gave me this answer, 'An easy belief.' Yes; those were the words. Light ones to you, no doubt, but false—false as hell."

"Not false when uttered," says Evelyn

eagerly. "Why do you seek to lower me? When I said that to you I had no idea of marrying Mr. Crawford. Why, you *must* believe that," with growing agitation. "Amongst all the other storages of your memory, amongst all the evidence you have so carefully collected for my undoing, you must recollect that just before you arrived on that day I had refused Mr. Crawford."

"So you told me," contemptuously. "And yet, one month afterwards, all the world hears that you are engaged to him. All," bitterly, "save me. I was purposely kept in the dark."

She makes a gesture as though she would have spoken, but he interrupts her.

"How well, now, I can interpret those tears," says he, with a mocking laugh. "Whatever else was false, I believe them to have been genuine. It could not have been an altogether happy experience—the accepting of a man old enough to be your father. Youth—*honest* youth—seeks youth."

"You give me the lie, then," says she, her face very white. "You think I concealed

the truth that day. You accuse me of direct falsehood?"

"I accuse you of nothing. As you yourself just now reminded me, I have no right to praise or blame."

"To wilfully destroy an old friendship," says she, in a clear tone that should have warned him, but fails, "is a thing from which most people shrink. You are apparently superior to such weakness."

"As for that," says he, "I am no longer your friend."

"Ah! that makes it easier," says she quickly.

"Naturally! I can quite understand your view of it. Throw over any ancient feeling you may have entertained for me, I entreat you, and forget you ever felt it. I do not plead on friendship's lines—I have no faith in friendship. It is a fraud—a sentiment. I merely protest against the treatment to which I have been subjected—no more."

"What treatment?"

"Well, for *one* thing," cries he, bursting out into a storm of passion and flinging aside

as though it is no longer possible to hide himself behind it the cloak of scorn with which he has been dallying, "why was I kept in ignorance all this time?" It is the first grievance—the most terrible—the most fatal. If he had known he might have come to her—have pleaded, entreated—and not perhaps in vain. It is the secrecy that has been the final thrust of the dagger in a wound already mortal. "Why did nobody write and tell me? Why was I, of all people, alone left in the dark? Only last week my mother wrote and told me of a fact that had been known to the entire neighbourhood for over a month. 'A desirable match,' she called it. So you call it, too, no doubt." He pauses, as if waiting for her to answer him, but no words fall from her pale lips. "A most *damnable* match *I* call it," says he hotly.

She turns away as if to leave him, but he places himself in her path and compels her to remain.

"Not yet. You shall not go yet. It is our last meeting," says he. "Do not grudge me a moment or two." He laughs contemptu-

ously. "*What* a lovers' meeting! Well, never mind. You have your other lover now."

"What is it you would know?" says she desperately, yet with that touch of dignity that has supported and beautified her all through. "Ask me and I will answer. I must soon go home."

"You know," says he. "Why was not I told?"

"Where lay the necessity that you *should* be told? Why you, above all others? I don't suppose the world generally was made acquainted with the fact of my engagement. Then why you?"

"Great heaven!" says he, laying his hands suddenly upon her shoulders and forcing her to meet his gaze. "Who could have thought that a little unsophisticated thing like you could have been so false—so worldly! How *dare* you talk to me like that!" Almost unconsciously he shakes her slight form to and fro beneath his grasp, but, except for the deepening of the pallor round her lips, she gives no sign. "You, who *know* how I love you!"

"Oh! no, no," cries she, almost violently, as if warding off some terrible thing. As she speaks she moves resolutely, and shakes her shoulders from beneath his grasp. "I never thought——"

"Thought! You knew!" sternly. "You knew, too, that I believed in you. Your very silence about this wretched engagement condemns you. Oh! Evelyn, that you of all people should count money before love."

"How terribly unjust you are," says she, with a tremulous gesture. "Surely your mother, when giving you the news of my engagement, told you, too, some—some of the reasons for it? she told you the truth about it—what actually led to it?"

"Oh, the truth! There is not a scrap of truth about it from beginning to end. It is falsity itself."

She turns away from him, as though giving up argument, in a little heartbroken way that chills him, yet somehow adds to his anger against her. Is this a fresh wile? And yet, can one compel nature? Can the cheek whiten so at will? How *very* white she is,

and is she slighter, more fragile that she used to be?

"You are looking ill," says he; "out of spirits, too. This money, then, has not sufficed you?"

"Are you inhuman?" cries she suddenly. Her large eyes, so much larger than they used to be, as it seems to him, or is it that her face is smaller—thinner? "You know, you *must* know"—throwing out her hands in a little agonized fashion—"they have told you, I'm sure, how it is with me, and yet you would force me to put it into words."

"I wouldn't have you distress yourself, certainly," says he, with tardy and very ungracious compunction, but she hardly seems to hear him.

"If the colonel had not been in such sore straits, if—if ruin had not threatened us, and if," mournfully, "Mr. Crawford had not come to our rescue, I might"—she hesitates, and then goes on—"I confess it to you"—lifting her heavy eyes to his—"I might never have thought of this marriage. But he came, and he was so good to us—so glad to be of use,

without any thought of a recompense, that I was glad to be able to give him something in return."

"*Something!* One is bound to congratulate him upon his bargain. Certainly he has got the best of it."

"You must not, however, think," goes on she calmly, ignoring his last remark, "that I have any feeling but real honest *liking* for Mr. Crawford, or that I"—tightening her hand somewhat upon the branch of the tree against which she is leaning, but never once removing her unfriendly eyes from his—"am seeking to explain this matter to you, or excusing to you my acceptance of Mr. Crawford. I like him—I respect him——"

"And he is a very rich man. I quite see."

"He is, at all events, the best man I have ever met," says she, calmly still, and as if determined to treat him with the contempt she knows she ought to feel for him.

"And you have met so many," says he, with a short unmirthful laugh.

"I have met enough to teach me who is, and who is not, worthy of regard. One need

not know the whole world to learn *that!* Half-a-dozen people are sufficient to give one a full insight into the principal faults and virtues of humanity," says this little sage with the sore heart. She delivers her text uncompromisingly, and as if she defies him to contradict it.

To her just now life indeed seems limited, maimed—a poor affair enough, taking it all together. So much to lose in it and yet so little to gain. This is the problem that perplexes her by its seeming unfairness, and renders her a prey to that dull despair that comes to us all now and again during our journey through this world.

All her thoughts are out of drawing to-day. There is nothing pleasant on which their eyes may rest. The foreground is but a distorted misery; the background, a blank.

"And he is the immaculate one. I hope he'll prove so. Well, it is your own affair, of course; and, for the future, you can go your way and I can go mine."

"The first truism you have uttered to-day," says she, with that new air of indifference that

almost amounts to contempt that he has found so irritating.

"Not the last, however. I'll give you another. You speak of this coming marriage of yours with a brave air, and of Crawford as though he were the one man on earth. All that is very clever, no doubt, but you don't deceive anybody by it. You will marry him, of course, but you won't be able to forget one thing."

"Yes?" questions she, in a low tone, but looking straight at him.

"That he *bought you!* For that's what it comes to."

"Eaton!"

"Ah, you don't like the sound of it! But console yourself; it is a very common occurrence. It is done every day. I suppose Crawford knows what he is about. He can't be doing it with blinded eyes, and yet I pity him too—from my soul I do."

"Go on," says she hoarsely. "If you have anything more to say, *say* it, and be done for ever. It is the last chance you will ever have."

"I know that. This is the last time I shall ever willingly look upon your face again. The Evelyn I loved was not you, therefore I am well quit of you."

"After all," says she, with a little pale smile, "you need not congratulate yourself so energetically. There was never a time—was there?—when you were *not* quit of me. Did I ever belong to you in any way? I think not?"

"You are right," says he. "I had a dream of some one, but it was the wildest dreaming. She never existed. I suppose I gave poor human nature too much credit. I believed she could create a perfect creature, and she has scoffed at my belief. However"—with a touch of satisfaction that is yet full of sorrow—"if I have fathomed your shallow nature, he I suppose has not. His punishment is to come. You have flung me over, but he—he has got to live his life with you. He will find you out in time—as I have. You have deceived me—you will deceive him. More"—passionately—"you *are* deceiving him!"

"I am *not!*" in a low but vehement tone.

"You say that!"

"Certainly I do."

"You are prepared, then, to assure me that you——"

"I am prepared to assure you nothing. I refuse to vindicate my conduct to you in any way."

"Why, that is the oldest artifice in the world," says he. "To stand on one's dignity and so decline to refute the charge that cannot be refuted. You might surely do something better than that. Now here is a crucial test. Answer me this: do you love Crawford? Ah! You will give me no reply to that. You *know* you don't. Silence is the better part! Lying, I see, has not as yet come easy to you."

The girl turns imperiously to him, her eyes aflame, her slender figure rigid in her anger.

"*Go!*" says she in a clear sweet voice that cuts him like a knife, so cold it is—so *final.*

Then, as if finding it intolerable to her to look at him for even so short a time as may elapse between her dismissal and his going, she moves swiftly from him, runs down the

high bank that leads to the waterfall, and is presently lost to sight amongst the heavy underwood below.

CHAPTER VIII.

Eaton's walk home is a rapid one, and his entry into his mother's boudoir can hardly be called tranquil. It is midday, and the crisp November sun is trying with all its might to put out the glowing fire upon the hearth. Lady Stamer bending over her davenport, where she is endeavouring to get through the answers to the piles of fashionable letters that lie on her right hand, looks up at him with an annoyed frown.

"I want to speak to you," says the young man shortly.

"I am afraid you will have to put it off till this evening. I'm up to my eyes in business. Nothing very important, I suppose?"

"*Very* important," more shortly still. Lady Stamer, scenting battle in the breeze, puts on her armour. Her chilliest expression covers her face instantly.

"Even so, I must ask you to wait. And really, Eaton, I must protest against your habit of entering a room in this boisterous fashion. A schoolboy might be excused for so doing—but you——"

"I am sorry, but I must ask you to give me five minutes at once," says he, taking no heed of her trivial querulity, and throwing up his head with that little gesture of command inherited from his father—and that is so hateful to her. "Your correspondence," with a slow and contemptuous glance at her pile of letters, "can wait so long, I daresay—of vital interest though they doubtless are."

"You are very rude," says his mother calmly. "But one understands that there is only that to be expected of you. In these days a mother succumbs to her children. I succumb to you. Now—for your mighty intelligence."

She laughs angrily, and throwing herself back in her chair and her pen into an ormolu stand, looks superciliously up at him.

Now that the very moment has arrived, he feels as if words fail him. He knows what is

in his mind—his belief in her treachery, his knowledge of her vehement opposition to his union with Evelyn—but—what has she done after all?

Lady Stamer, staring at him, and noting the hesitation, laughs again.

"Come," says she. "As you seem in a difficulty, I will help you. Who should help a child but its mother? And you are a baby, my dear Eaton, in many ways, in spite of the fact that you have come to man's estate. Now I will tell you what is in your mind. You have come here to rage against me about that little D'Arcy girl—because she has very wisely chosen to marry a man who can give her all the good things of this life. Good heavens! Why storm at me, then! The girl has done it of her own free will. The girl, in my opinion, is quite right. They are all miserably poor, those D'Arcys—and if one regrets the mercenary element in a character so young as hers, still"—throwing out her lovely hands gracefully, until all the diamonds on them flash with a pretty radiance—"it is nevertheless wise."

"You are plausible—as usual," says the young man, who has gone over to the chimney-piece, and leaning against it, is looking moodily down upon the black fur rug at his feet—no blacker than his thoughts. "But I cannot divest myself of the belief that she might have been saved from this marriage—a marriage that seems to me iniquitous."

"That is the man's view," briskly. "But, my dear boy, *why* save her? It is her own doing—and really, for my part, I think her a very clever girl. There is hardly a mother in the county who wouldn't have given her daughter thankfully to Mr. Crawford, and here is this little half-educated thing carrying him off under their noses. Rather smart of her, it seems to me."

"You always disliked her," says he slowly. "Therefore it is impossible you could understand. Prejudice blinds half the world. I have been thinking it all over——"

He has indeed. That rapid walk home, that last passionately reproachful glance she had given him—have both helped to clear his

mind. He had been eager enough to declare to her that he had understood her, "fathomed her shallow nature," he had called it—but had he? Oh, how could he have spoken to her like that? And how does he dare now to condemn his mother for not understanding her?

"She is not mercenary," says he at last, in a tone full of conviction.

"It is an ugly word," says his mother agreeably. "Why use it? We can probably find another; there are so many different names nowadays for just the same thing. I have suggested to you that she is clever. Will that do? Not mercenary—not designing; she is only clever."

"She is a martyr. She is deliberately sacrificing herself," says the young man slowly. His eyes are still bent upon the rug, his mind has gone back to that last scene with her, and his heart is failing him. Somehow now it all lies clear before him—he understands her every motive. And to her terrible grief he had come, only to add to it—to give another stab to that already burdened soul. Oh, that

he dared to seek her again, and at her feet demand his pardon!

"You mean that story about the colonel's difficulties, and Mr. Crawford's dropping from the clouds to save him from destruction, like the prince in a fairy tale? Rather an elderly prince, it must be confessed," with an airy laugh. "A very pretty story, we all acknowledge, and very well got up. Beauty in distress, Beast rushing to save her. Pouf! My dear Eaton, do be reasonable."

"It is the reasonableness of it that strikes me—and that makes it so cruel. The colonel would have gone to the wall if Crawford had not interfered, and—and she was too proud to take all and give nothing."

"And what was the 'all,' as you eloquently put it? A paltry two thousand pounds. Now *do* you think Colonel D'Arcy—do you think any one in any sort of position—could be ruined for so small a sum?"

"Certainly I do. D'Arcy could as easily have got twenty thousand as two; by which I mean he could not have got either. Of course he could have been sold up, and there would

have been some miserable residue on which he and his might have dragged through life, but when there was a chance of escaping such a death in life, Evelyn grasped it."

"Well, and what does it all come to? You have struck the old key-note on which we started. She saw her opportunity and—grasped it."

"For *them*, not for herself."

"As you will," shrugging her shoulders, as if argument is over. "At all events, she grasped it. She saved the colonel and made herself a rich woman for life in a single stroke. That was killing two birds with one stone, with a vengeance. For my part I admire the girl, however others may condemn her. Nothing I adore like astuteness."

"You fail in astuteness here," says he raising his eyes and for the first time looking straight at her. Condemnation and anger are burning in his glance. "Or else you are wilfully maligning Evelyn."

"Wilfully! What do you mean, Eaton?" She too has cast off her affectation of careless scorn, and her cold eyes meet his with violent

indignation in them. She, who has been accustomed to rule her little world with a despot's sway, to whom even her eldest son submits—is she to be taken to task by this—troublesome younger son? A harsher adjective had risen to her mind.

"I mean what I say. Evelyn D'Arcy is neither mercenary nor designing, nor clever in the hateful way you would represent her, and you know it."

"I know this at all events," rising and leaning one hand upon the arm of her couch; "that you are unpardonably insolent. You forget you are speaking to your mother."

"And you, *you*—do you not forget?" cries he with deep agitation. "Am I not your son? Is the whole happiness of my life nothing to you? You knew I loved her; if I never before put it into words for you, still you knew of it, as surely as though I had cried it aloud to heaven."

"Pray do not waste so much superfluous energy," says his mother contemptuously. "You need not seek to force the truth from me; I am perfectly willing to admit it. Cer-

tainly I knew that you fancied yourself in love with that little hoyden, and though I did not *know* it—I do not profess to be a *clairvoyante* —still I hoped devoutly that some saving clause, such as Mr. Crawford has proved, would arrive to save you from your own idiocy. You accuse me of forgetting that you are my son. I let the bad taste of that accusation go by, and I will even entreat you to remember that the first duty of a mother to her child is to see to his welfare, both earthly and heavenly. With regard to the latter," with a pious sigh, "I fear you have got beyond me, and must choose your own line now; but with the former I can still deal. Your marriage with a penniless girl would mean your social ruin."

"Therefore——"

"Therefore, I am rejoiced that, without any interference of mine, Evelyn D'Arcy has placed herself so very satisfactorily."

"Therefore," persists he hotly, taking no notice of her interruption, "you kept me carefully in ignorance of all that was going on here until it was too late for me to step in and

save the girl I love from a life that must necessarily prove abhorrent to her."

"Surely she is the best judge of that. If it is so *very* abhorrent to her she can throw it up. Mr. Crawford, who seems to me to be little short of a fool, could, if he is to be considered of no further use, be very easily got rid of. But you will find that Miss D'Arcy, like a sensible girl, will see that he can be of very considerable use still."

"Let us have done with Evelyn," says he shortly. "What I came to ask you was, why was I not told of her engagement until it was a month old?"

"Really, my dear, that is a problem you must solve for yourself."

"No, it is you who can solve it. For that whole month you wrote to me regularly twice a week, yet in not one of those letters did you mention what you must have known so terribly concerned me."

"I *might* say that it was because I could not bear to grieve you," says Lady Stamer, carefully adjusting a screen between her and the firelight; "but the truth beyond everything.

I did not tell you because I feared you might hurry home and cause a disturbance. I see now I was right. You would have taken the first train; you would have hastened to Miss D'Arcy; you would probably have found her with her *fiancé;* you would have given way to your ungovernable temper—there would have been a most unseemly disturbance. Miss D'Arcy, who, I am convinced, knows exactly what she intends to do, would have given you your *congé;* poor dear Mr. Crawford would have been greatly distressed, and you would have been upset—*for a fortnight*, or until the next pretty girl took your fancy. Now, I avoided all that. I let the engagement be thoroughly confirmed, and then I let you know of it, delicately, gently. Now it is all over, and you need not be distressed; you need not even see her."

"I have seen her," says he coldly.

"Ah!" says she. The exclamation is wrung from her in spite of her determination to treat this affair coolly. There is a silence that lasts quite a minute, and then:

"Where did you see her?"

"This morning. In the Grange Wood."

"By chance?"

"Not quite. I went up to Firgrove to see her—to learn the actual truth, and Jimmy told me where she had gone to. I followed her, and——"

"Well?"

"I insulted her unpardonably, so far as I can remember. I started full of *your* view of it, and when we met I——" He breaks off, as if recollection is intolerable to him. "Never mind. It is all over now. If she thinks of me at all, it is with no kindly feeling."

"And a good thing too," says Lady Stamer, with some alacrity. "Put her out of your mind, Eaton. To persist in anything like a courtship of her, now she is engaged to another man, would be little less than immoral."

"You speak as though she were already married."

"Well, so she is, in a sense. Decent people, when they engage themselves, have undertaken all the duties, the responsibilities of matrimony. And in this matter see what a good match it is for the girl!"

"A loveless match can never be a good match," gloomily.

"But who is to say it isn't a love match," says she, forgetting her first theory, in her desire to convince him of the futility of interfering with Evelyn's engagement. "Mr. Crawford is a charming man—quite an acquisition to the neighbourhood—young and old admire him. Why should not a girl like Evelyn—who knows so little of the world—be captivated by him?"

"Why, indeed! And if so, how is she mercenary, designing, and clever;" says he, with a short laugh. Then savagely, "Why can't you leave her out of it? To discuss her with you is to feel as though——"

He subdues himself by a supreme effort.

"As though you could kill me?" suggests she, with a low laugh. "My good boy, if you feel like that, pray go away. You are doing no good here, and you are hindering me from doing what must be done before post hour. Now go. Miss D'Arcy's engagement is a *fait accompli*—why discuss it?"

"It is not accomplished yet," with a

strange note in his voice that instantly alarms her.

"Any one who would seek to upset that engagement would be acting maliciously," says she coldly. "I believe no son of mine, however alien to me in thought and sentiment, would be guilty of a dishonourable action."

"What is honour?" says he suddenly, turning to her.

"If it is to be a fresh argument I confess I am unequal to it. I must beg, Eaton, that you will leave me. I can bear no more," says she, waving him to the door with a gesture not to be combated.

CHAPTER IX.

"Time and the hour runs through the roughest day," and this one long sad day has at last come to an end. Night has fallen with a sullen haste that speaks of storm before morning, and has cast its gloomy veil upon the patient earth. As yet the heavens are clear, if threatening; the wind is low; it is almost warm for the time of year, and even a spiritless moon may be seen now and then, trying in a faint-hearted fashion to do the right thing, and climb her heaven.

Evelyn, who had come home from her unhappy meeting with Eaton feeling crushed morally and physically, and with a severe headache, had declared herself unwell, and had lain all day long upon her little bed, battling fiercely with the misery that has overtaken her. To be true, to be faithful, to the man who has been so good to her and hers, is her chief desire. But, oh! how to kill the longing for

that other man, who has been almost brutal to her—who has been unjust, blind, cruel—but who loves her too.

As evening grows into night a desire to go out into the quiet garden and feel the wind blow upon her tired head takes possession of her. Slipping softly downstairs, she passes on tiptoe past the door of the sitting-room, where she can hear the merry voices of the elder children fighting gaily over their bézique, and with a sigh of relief opens the small door at the end of the passage that leads directly into the garden.

The feeling that she is giving the children the go-by brings a half-amused smile to her face. Darling children! It is indeed but seldom that she ever cares to avoid them. Bnt just now she could not endure even their harmless prattle, and if they got only a hint of this delightful adventure of hers, this stepping out into the cold sweet dark, at the ungodly hour of ten, not all the mothers and fathers in Christendom would have been able to keep them back from following her. Therefore much caution is necessary.

Her desire is gained! She has closed the door softly behind her; she is now stepping lightly into the silent garden. The damp short grass is at her feet, the sky above her head. The wind, slight as it was, has ceased. A strange unearthly quiet fills the wintry air.

> "Not a sound is heard,
> No sights are seen; no melancholy bird
> Sings tenderly and sweet: but all the air
> Is thick and motionless—as if it were
> A prelude to some dreadful tragedy."

There is indeed something oppressive in the night—that threatening of thunder all day long, now culminating—that had, no doubt, added to the nervous attack that is making her temples throb.

Still, this is better than the small room upstairs. There is space here, and vastness, and a chill that soothes her. Lost in her own thoughts she goes idly onwards until an opening in the laurustinas on one hand, and a path through the leafless rose trees on the other, compels her to make a choice.

The laurustinas that seem to be opening their arms to her look nevertheless dark and for-

bidding. Beyond them, however, lies a little summer-house. The pale moon overhead is casting on its roof a sickly ray or two. It will be a resting-place. Surely in its calm seclusion she will be restored to some sort of quietude.

She has taken twenty steps or so in its direction when the consciousness that some one is coming *towards* her brings her to a frightened standstill. At this hour—who can it be? She so questions herself, but in truth she knows. How often has he come and gone during her short life! How many and many a time has she listened for that step that is now coming closer—closer! But that he should come *now!* And after all that happened this morning!

A wild mad rush of joy darting through all her veins lends her strength. She stands motionless, but involuntarily, unconsciously, holds out her hands to him in the darkness.

"Evelyn! Evelyn!" cries he, grasping them, and holding them as though in an eternal grasp. "It *is* you? I was going up to the house, but——"

"Yes, it is I," says she, leaving her hands in his in her tumult of delight and tightening the grasp of her slender fingers upon his. "Can you not see me?"

"I have come back," says the young man hurriedly, "to implore your forgiveness—to go on my knees to you. I find I cannot *live* unless I am at peace with you."

"Oh, that is all right," says she, breaking into low feverish laughter. "I forgive all—everything. You did not mean it. I felt even *then* that you didn't. Oh," laughing again in a soft but heart-breaking fashion, "I don't know what I should have *done* if you hadn't come. The long night—and always thinking—and——"

She stops abruptly; that eager laughter dies. A heavy shudder shakes her slender frame, and she bursts into tears.

"Oh, it is all wrong," cries she, dragging her hands from his and covering her eyes. "It is *terrible!* I am mad, I think! Oh, go away again. You should never have come—never."

"I think I should," says he stoutly. "You

are tired. Come in here"—leading her into the little thatched house—"and let us argue it out quietly."

"Argument is useless," says she finally. Some thought that means despair has checked her tears, and she now looks up at him in the dim moonlight with large sad eyes.

"You can't know that yet. Let me lay my case before you."

"There is another case," says she.

"Yes. But surely not so strong as mine?"

"Stronger," sadly.

"You make too much of it," says he. "Say he did you a good turn once, is that any reason why you should give up the whole happiness of your life to him? Oh, Evelyn! Darling heart! If you have no pity for yourself, I implore you to have pity upon me."

He catches her hand and presses it passionately to his lips.

"Ah! it is too late for that," says she with a strange smile. "*You* might have had pity on me, but you didn't. No," interrupting him when he would have spoken, with a determined gesture, "not a word. I want no explanations,

it is all over now. There is an end of whatever friendship may have been between us."

"Don't say that," says he, growing deadly pale. "Do you forbid me your presence? If this horrible thing must be, at least do not cut me utterly adrift—do not fling me altogether out of your path. I was a brute to you this morning, I know that; but I felt half mad—and—Evelyn,"—crushing the hand he holds between both his own—"*must* you marry that man?"

"I must," in a frozen sort of way.

"But it is wicked; it is devilish! You will betray both him and me. My darling," in a desperate tone, "don't be angry—don't mind what I say; I hardly know myself what I am saying. But—don't persist in this matter; give me one word of hope—of comfort."

"I haven't one to give," in a stony sort of way. "You come," with a sad little movement of her head, "*too late!*"

"By that I am to understand that if I had spoken sooner, before I last left home, you—you would have listened to me?"

No answer.

"Oh, why did I not speak!" cries he in anguish, taking that eloquent silence for the truth it is.

"Oh, why, *why*, WHY!" sobs she, breaking once again into bitter weeping. "Why did you not say all this before?"

"I don't know," mournfully. He has folded his arms round her and is straining her to his heart. "I was afraid, perhaps. All my life, I think—I *know*—I have loved you, but until this last summer it never became quite clear to me, and then—oh, don't cry like that, my sweet—my love——"

"And then?" asks she miserably, recalling him from her present grief to that past one when she had seemed to be less than nothing to him, whilst he had been all in all to her.

"Why, then you were cold to me," says he; "you *were* cold, Evelyn; you must remember that. And then that cursed Crawford came with all his money, and they whispered to me that you were a sensible girl, and were seeing your way clear to be a rich one as well."

"And you——" making an effort to break away from his protecting arms.

"No, I did not believe them; never—never. Not for a moment. But," with hesitation, "you certainly threw me over for him very often."

"Oh, no!"

"Well," humbly, "it seemed so to me. And I grew nervous about it. After all, what is there in me that a girl should specially fancy me?" says Captain Stamer with such astounding modesty as only love the all-powerful could create. "And that last day, you know, when I came up here to you, you were dreadfully—er—er; you were really, darling."

"Who? I!" exclaims she, showing herself thoroughly conversant with the foreign language he is using. "Oh! it was you who were cruel—cold—unjust."

Evidently the "er—er" had meant all this.

"Was it? Perhaps so. I didn't know it," says he dejectedly. "I came up that day to tempt fortune—to try my fate with you, and

something in your manner, something purely imaginary, I am *sure*," hastily; he is growing positively abject now, "prevented the words from passing my lips. I could not ask you to marry me when I felt your answer would be No."

"I don't know how you could have thought that," says she with naïve but very mournful wonder. "As for me, I was always so afraid that you would guess how it was with me."

"*Too* afraid, I suppose," says he with a deep sigh.

"Perhaps so!" with a deeper. "But how was I to know? You seemed to like every girl just as well as you liked me."

"Evelyn!"

"Well, you *did indeed*. I'm sorry if it sounds horrid, but that's just how it looked to me. Those Staveley girls, now! You remember that day at Parklands when you gave Esther a rose?"

"No, I don't indeed."

"Oh! well, I do."

"But I suppose she asked for it, and in one's own home how was one to refuse her?

You wouldn't have me refuse her, would you?"

"I don't know," slowly—and with a searching glance that quite undoes him. "I don't know whether she asked you for it either, but you needn't have *smiled* at her when you gave it."

This, being plainly a grievance that has long rankled, is received by Stamer with due gravity. In truth he is so sad at heart that not even the absurdest of his little sweetheart's remarks could move him to mirth.

"I wish I had frowned," says he. "But it didn't occur to me. I wish too," tightening his hands on hers and regarding her in the uncertain moonlight with a miserable regret, "that I had dared all things at our last meeting and asked you to marry me."

"*Don't!*" says she, dragging her slender fingers out of his and turning away.

"But, Evelyn!" coming closer to her, encouraged by that impetuous movement, so full of poignant regret. "Surely it is too early to despair. You do not belong to him yet. And now that we both know that we

love each other, why need this unfortunate engagement with Crawford be carried farther? You *do* love me, don't you? And I—— "

Words seem to fail him here. Folding his arms once more around her, he draws her to him, and stooping seeks to kiss her, but——

CHAPTER X.

She denies him. Laying her hand against his lips, she presses him gently from her. He accepts the refusal at once; there is something in her eyes that checks him. Imprinting the caress he would have given her, upon her small brown palm instead, he instantly releases her.

"You will give him up?" says he calmly.

"Who? Mr. Crawford?" With a startled glance.

"Yes. Why not? He is less than nothing to you."

"You are wrong there," nervously. "He ——"

"Has done you one immense service, no doubt; but beyond that, has no part in your life. You will not persist in this affair, Evelyn? You will throw aside this——"

"I cannot," says she in a low tone and with a little frightened expression. "You don't know; you don't understand. I—I *daren't.*"

"Daren't?"

"Yes. I'd be afraid to tell him I wouldn't marry him. Oh! let me go, Eaton," beginning to cry bitterly. "Don't, don't, *don't* hold me. I belong to him. You were right this morning when you said he had bought me. That is how I feel about it. I am his. There is no escape for me. It is as though I were a slave, tied and bound, and without voice or power of my own in the matter. Oh! what shall I do?" cries the poor child sobbing violently now. "Oh, why, why am I so unhappy?"

"You are taking an absurdly morbid view of the whole thing. It won't be a pleasant task no doubt, but the straightforward course for you to take is to go direct to Crawford and tell him you made a mistake, and that——"

"I couldn't," wildly. "He would listen to me, and he would say nothing, and there

would be a look in his eyes—— No," miserably, "I'd rather die than do it. You," faintly, "have no idea how *dreadfully* fond he is of me."

"I can make a guess at it," grimly. "Still —I think you should be just to yourself as well as to him, Evelyn."

"He wouldn't thank me for such justice," says she sorrowfully.

"You are prepared then to sacrifice three lives," says he in a new tone, so strange, so grave, so full of something that is almost sternness that her heart, if possible, sinks lower. "You think me dishonourable for suggesting this course to you—is your conduct honourable, do you think?"

"Well," says she with a heavy sigh, raising to his her large eyes, dark with tears, "it is I who shall suffer for it."

"Oh, no," says he with a most unmirthful laugh. "Don't console yourself with *that* fiction! We shall all three suffer, and Crawford, of whose happiness you are so careful, will probably suffer most of all. Come, Evelyn, be sensible. Do as I advise you.

Break through these trammels and be yourself again."

"I could not," almost inaudibly.

"You mean you will not. After all," coldly, "why should you? There are many things for, as well as against, this marriage. I grow ridiculous when I seek to pose as one of such extreme importance in your life."

He turns abruptly from her. He might perhaps, in his angry misery have left her, but the grasp of a small cold hand, the eager clinging of trembling fingers around his, recalls him to his gentler self.

"It is our last, last time together," whispers she desperately. "Don't be unkind to me. Don't, *darling*."

The fond appellation, coming from her as though wrung from her in her pain, goes to his heart.

"Oh, no," exclaims he sharply; "not that, Evelyn, not that." He feels as though a dagger has been plunged into him. "Unkind to her!" He presses the hand he holds passionately to his lips, since sweeter joys are refused him. "But when a man's heart is

breaking, how is he to know what words he uses? And see now, Evelyn," trying to recover himself and attain to a calm judicial air. "Say Crawford is miserable for a month or two after you—you——"

"Throw him over. Go on. Why hesitate about it?" wearily.

"Well, yes. Surely that is not so bad as for you to be miserable all your long sweet life."

"You talk like that," says she slowly and with the slightest *soupçon* of reproach. "*You.* Will you be miserable, then, for only a month or two, when——" She falters.

"But that will never be," says he promptly and with sudden fervour. All his courage has come back to him. He seems fresh and vigorous, and very fit "to fight his battle o'er again." "It is not worth an argument. I will resign you to no man living. Why should I?" with increasing valour, seeing she does not seek to silence him. "Love is lord of all, and love is on my side; he has given you to me, and no other."

"Cruel love!" says she with a smile that is sad as a tear.

"Don't look at it in that way."

"Is there another way? He has placed my heart where it would be—my body he has forgotten."

"He has left that for your own bestowal. Do his generosity justice. Say you will give up Crawford."

"You forget," clasping her hands nervously before her, "that I—owe him, not only unfailing kindness, but a large sum of money."

"Do you mean to say that you think he——"

"No, no! Don't so persistently misjudge him. He gave freely, gladly, with all his heart, and without thought of reward. I will even confess to you, Eaton," colouring hotly, though she knows he cannot see her crimson cheeks, "that I had to *entreat* him to marry me before he would consent."

"Oh, I daresay!" says Captain Stamer derisively. "I think I see you begging to *any* man to marry you—in vain."

"Well, he would not hear of it at first," sighing. "And it was only when——"

"When the farce was clearly played out,

and he was quite sure he had made his magnanimity apparent to you, and he began to fear you might take him at his word, that he nobly consented to—destroy your whole life. Pshaw! It's as plain as a pikestaff."

"How unjust you can be!"

"Not to Crawford," with conviction. "From the first moment I saw him I felt a distrust to him; and I cannnot yet believe it was unfounded."

"You distrusted me too," says she sadly.

"That you must forgive me," rejoins he as sadly. "It was not a real distrust either; nothing deep-rooted; the mere madness of a moment, rising from a heart that was on fire with grief and despair. It arose through love of you."

"He loves me too!"

"Don't speak like that, Evelyn," exclaims he vehemently. "It is horrible to me to think that he so much as dares to love you. Oh!" changing from vehement anger to entreaty as vehement, "my dear, *dear* girl, why will you wilfully ruin both our lives?"

"You talk like that—as if you condemned

me," says she with deep agitation, and thrusting him from her when he would have sought to draw nearer to her. "But what would you have me do, then? He saved the colonel from terrible misfortune; he restored to Kitty her peace of mind; he rescued the children from penury and discomfort; he gave the colonel—oh, no, no—he gave *me* £2,000; and am I to give him in return only base ingratitude? Only a broken heart and a trust betrayed?"

"As to the money," says he, "I can get that. I can manage it easily. Why on earth, darling, didn't you ask me for it at the beginning?"

"Where could you have got it? Where could you get it now even?" says she with growing dejection. "Besides I could never have asked you or any one for it. He offered it."

"I can get it now," eagerly. "Bertram——"

She checks him by a gesture.

"Do you think it likely he or your mother would help you in any scheme that would

enable you to marry *me?* Besides," rising from the rustic bench on which she had seated herself a minute ago, "even if they would—it would be useless."

"One word," entreats he, detaining her, but very gently. "If I *can* arrange it—then?"

"You, mean," says she slowly, "that if you can repay Mr. Crawford the £2,000, that then I might honourably consider all things at an end between him and me. But what of his kindness, his delicacy, his faith in me, his generosity in coming forward to help us, when no one else came?"

"That is unjust," says Stamer coldly. "I heard—I knew nothing."

"No, no," impatiently. "I was not thinking of you—of any one—only of him! Who shall repay all his tenderness to me and mine? *I alone.* And am I to do so by abandonment, by treachery, by cruelty?"

"He is fortunate in being so high up in your esteem," says he with a sneer. Then, "Oh! forgive me again, Evelyn," cries he with deep contrition. "After all, who am I that I should sneer at him? I begin to

think he is the better fellow of the two. He does not wound you as I do."

"No," says she in a low voice.

"Ah," jealously, "you allow him all virtues, me none."

"Alas! How I wish I saw none in you," cries she with sudden bitter vehemence. "I wish you were as I thought you a month ago, without love for me."

"Is love for you a virtue?" says he, laughing sadly. "Why, then indeed I have it so largely that it must cover the multitude of my sins."

"It is a misfortune," says she. "Before, when I believed you cared less than nothing for me, it was all easier, simpler, if," with a swift, adorable glance at him, "even *more* unhappy. I had my life arranged for me then; a dull one, without hope, but without this new terrible pain. And now, now——! Oh, it is cruel of you! You come here, you tell me what I have craved to hear for all these dreary months, but you tell it me too late! You leave me nothing now in the whole wide world save regret and—remorse."

"You upbraid me. Have I then no grievance, no regret?"

"You will forget—in a month or two."

"Evelyn! Evelyn!" cries he passionately. He throws his arms round her and strains her to his heart, thus once more in a measure taking her into possession. "Am I nothing to you that you persist in this hateful engagement? Give him up—give yourself to me instead. Do you think that if he knew, he would wish you to marry him? If he is the paragon you represent, would he not rather secure your happiness than his own? See now, heart," pressing her hand against his cheek, "if you are afraid, let me speak to him!"

By a single vehement effort she releases herself.

"What folly!" cries she feverishly. "You to speak to him! Now, once for all, Eaton," leaning towards him and holding up her hand with an imperious gesture, "I forbid you to speak to Mr. Crawford on this matter. You *hear?*"

"You shall be obeyed, of course," returns he stiffly.

"Of course," says she with that little touch of childish hauteur that he had always thought so sweet in her. "And now good-night." She seems in a hurry to be gone. Perhaps she dreads more words, more arguments, stronger entreaties.

"I shall see you to the door," says he stiffly still.

"No, no," eagerly. "There is no need. Good-night." She holds out to him her hand nervously. It has grown very cold.

"How cold you are," says he anxiously. "I suppose you are not half warmly made up, and now you have got a chill. Come indoors quickly; what madness of me to keep you out at this hour."

"Madness indeed!" says she, but too low for him to hear her. A madness that will affect her her whole life long. Oh! if she had not come out—if she had not met him—she might never have known this deep, sweet thrill of pain; might never have known how *well* he loves her. Yet would she be without the knowledge?

She turns at the door to give him a last glance.

"Remember, I shall not give you up," he says doggedly, and a moment afterwards is lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

"*Sweet* day! so cool, so calm, so bright,"

Quotes Mr. Blount effusively, staring at the rivulets that are rushing down the panes. Patter, patter, patter goes the rain in most lachrymose numbers. The sky is a dingy brown, the wind is whirling round the house, the storm threatened last night is commencing to-day with a vengeance.

"Specially the 'cool,'" goes on Mr. Blount thoughtfully. "The sweetness of *that* quite enters into one's old bones. Do I know you well enough, Mrs. D'Arcy, to be entitled to poke your fire?" making a furious onslaught on that handsome mass of glowing coal and wood as he speaks. "If not, say so. By Jove!" standing still for a moment and staring out of the window that overlooks the avenue, with the poker uplifted in a martial manner. "Here comes Crawford. *Nothing* would keep that fellow at home, I suppose."

Evelyn, who is sitting on a distant ottoman, pretending to embroider a child's frock, starts slightly, and a deep dull red flames into her cheeks. Must she stay, must she meet him, he with that kindly, unsuspicious, trusting smile of his, and she——!

If it had been last month—a year ago—but last *night*. Hours so few between then and now that they seem like seconds. If she could but forget *his* words, and looks, and—— Oh! how *could* she have let him put his arms round her?

Her heart seems to burst with one long sigh. But she pores over her needlework industriously, lest her misery should grow apparent to the other two in the room. No! there is no chance of escape; Kitty would think it strange if she withdrew, and Batty is always such a fool, he would be sure to say something odd about it. And besides, there will be always days, and days, and days——. Just as well to face it at once. And after all it won't be so bad with Batty here. It was a merciful Providence that sent him over this morning, that started him before the rain

began. If he hadn't been here, Kitty would have thought it her kindly duty to go away presently under the pretence of heavy domestic requirements, but now she will stay to talk to Batty. What a life it is! One perpetual tutoring of oneself from morning till night, and never the task perfected.

"Dear me! is it really Mr. Crawford?" asks Mrs. D'Arcy. "I'm afraid he must be very wet. It is he indeed," peering over Mr. Blount's shoulder and smudging her sleeve with his poker. "He must be drowned!"

"Let us hope not," with a tragic uplifting of his eyes and the poker, "for Evelyn's sake. The misguided—but still dearly-beloved—Evelyn, who has had the folly to prefer him to *me*. Besides, dear Mrs. D'Arcy, if you will just look you will see that he is as safe as Noah in his ark. Like the patriarchs of old he has brought his tent with him."

"Certainly it *is* big," says Mrs. D'Arcy admiringly, alluding to Mr. Crawford's umbrella, which, to say the truth, has nothing mean about it. The avenue is one of those that are without the orthodox windings, and

therefore Mr. Crawford's coming can be watched from afar, from the moment he enters the gates of Firgrove until he lands under the shelter of the porch.

"It is unrivalled. It is of noble dimensions. It is worthy of all imitation," declares Mr. Blount enthusiastically. "It is a parachute of which any man might well be proud. It is the literal family umbrella of which we have all heard so much, but which so few of us have seen in the ribs. Where under heaven did he get it? Perhaps," with a burst of inspiration, "he *made* it!"

"Oh! nonsense!" says Mrs. D'Arcy, who is the kindliest soul alive, but not perhaps the smartest.

"Well, Evelyn, I'd hang on to it if *I* were you," says Mr. Blount. "It's a most useful article. It is quite big enough to shelter you and Crawford and all the little——"

"If I were you, Batty," says Evelyn, checking him severely, "I shouldn't let him see me peeping at him through a window."

"True, true," says that genial youth, lowering the poker, but otherwise taking no notice

of her suggestion. "There is something truly undignified in the word peeping. One shouldn't peep! But," bursting into a wild giggle as his eyes still follow Crawford's tall, advancing frame, "did you ever see such an ass as he looks? Now why on earth couldn't he have stayed at home on such an ungodly day as this?"

"Why couldn't you?" retorts Miss D'Arcy forcibly.

"Evelyn!" says Mr. Blount reproachfully. "Are *you* the one to ask that question? Good heavens! is there any wild beast of prey as cruel as '*the young girl?*' You know it is my hopeless love for you that drives me thither through the blinding rain."

"I don't believe it was raining one drop when you left Parklands," says Miss D'Arcy unrelentingly.

"Raining or not raining," says Mr. Blount, adroitly avoiding this insinuation, "you know I never can keep away from you."

"Well, perhaps Mr. Crawford can't either," says Mrs. D'Arcy with her pleasant little laugh.

"*Was* it raining?" demands Evelyn fixing Mr. Blount with an uncompromising eye.

"Was it? Let me see?" says that young man throwing himself at once into a deeply meditative attitude, and staring at the ceiling as though his life depends upon wringing the truth from it. "Well," with noble truthfulness, "perhaps not. If it had been——"

"You'd have stayed at home," puts in Miss D'Arcy ruthlessly. "What a pity it *wasn't*," says she presently, adding rudeness to ruthlessness.

"Why?" demands he mildly. "I don't think it would have made much difference. I have assured you I can't live without you, and a dogcart can generally be squeezed out of my aunt, even if Sir Bertram is away. I should have come all the same."

So he would! A half word that he had forced from Eaton in his jesting fashion last night, when Eaton had come rather late into the smoking-room looking fagged and wretched and hopeless, had determined him to walk or drive to Firgrove to-day, were all the elements

astir. News of her, however bald, would be welcome to Stamer's bruised spirit.

"Oh! I daresay," says Evelyn impatiently. She is holding herself together as well as she can, but she is distinctly out of tune with all her surroundings. Oh! to get away—to hide—to efface herself.

"To be rude to the one that adores you is surely a thankless task," says Mr. Blount with overwhelming severity. "But I know it is the one thing to be expected of woman! However, time may teach you that——Hallo! Crawford! *Here* you are! Who'd have thought it! This *is* a surprise! And *dry* too! Came in your brougham *of course!* Odd thing, you know; but Evelyn and I were just saying that in all probability, in spite of the weather, you would be sure to look in."

Crawford has shaken hands with Evelyn and has passed on to Mrs D'Arcy, so providentially does not see the indignant glance the former has directed at Mr. Blount. That ingenuous youth receives it full, and shows his deprecation of it by a display of gestures

hardly to be rivalled by the most advanced acrobat.

"What would you *have*, my dear girl?" whispers he tragically, whilst Crawford is asking questions about the colonel's cold. "The most correct thing in the world! Showed him your mind was entirely given over to him. Eh? Couldn't be better, eh?"

"I do hope you are not wet," says Mrs. D'Arcy hospitably to Crawford. "*Such* a day!"

"Yes," says Crawford. "Very bad. I had no idea it was going to be more than a shower when I left home, but you see we never know what is going to happen next in this happy-go-lucky world of ours. I felt dull—the atmosphere perhaps—I thought," with a slow loving glance at Evelyn, "I would come down here to be cheered."

"Well, so you shall be," says she, throwing down her embroidery, and coming at once up to the hearthrug where he is standing. "But how are we to cheer you on a day like this?"

"Providentially I brought the *Times* with

me," says Mr. Blount, drawing that paper from his pocket. "It's always full of information and murders."

"Oh! no, Batty, no murders," says Evelyn, with a sort of passionate haste.

"No murders," repeats Mr. Crawford, in a dull tone, as if echoing her request.

"That's morbidness, my dear girl; a phase of feeling that should instantly be checked. Now, at breakfast—— By-the-by, I hope my gentle aunt isn't giving way to bad language by this time at the abduction of her favourite paper—but never mind."

"You should mind," says Mrs. D'Arcy, severely for her. "And it was foolish of you too, as the colonel could have lent you his copy, if there is anything in it very special for you to read."

"There is! A real good thing. An awful thing!" says Mr. Blount, gazing round him, and growing positively radiant as he notes the impression he is creating. "About the best murder we've had for a twelvemonth."

"I think we none of us care much for that sort of news," says Mrs. D'Arcy, with a lingering

nervous glance at Evelyn. The girl has sunk into a chair, and is staring at Mr. Blount, but she has made no further protest.

"But this is the most mysterious affair," goes on Mr. Blount volubly. "Not a clue, not a trace—all buried in mystery. No apparent reason—no robbery—watch and money found on body. Let me see—m—m—where on earth is it?" turning paper. "Oh, here! It's so extraordinary that there's a leader on it. 'Police at fault'—always *are*. 'Nothing so strange as this last appalling and apparently purposeless crime has occurred since the mysterious murder of an elderly gentleman ten years since. Some of our readers may remember it. The victim was a Mr. Darling, who was found murdered on a Sunday afternoon in his own library at 10, Sandiford Street, where——'"

A sharp cry from Evelyn, or is it a groan? could there have been *both?*—startles Mr. Blount into silence. The paper falls from his hand, and he turns anxiously to where the girl is now standing upon the hearthrug, her eyes distended, her hands clasped upon her

bosom. She is as white as linen, and there is an expression of horror upon her face that terrifies him. What has happened?

Mrs. D'Arcy has risen.

"Oh! Batty, how *could* you? Oh! you *shouldn't* have done that," cries she to the petrified youth, who is glaring at the group before him. Mrs. D'Arcy has gone up to Evelyn, the keenest sympathy upon her face, and would have placed her arms round her, but the girl presses her back, and with a little convulsive sob rushes out of the room.

"Good gracious! What have I done now?" exclaims Mr. Blount miserably. But Mrs. D'Arcy has burst into tears, and in despair of learning anything from her, Blount turns his amazed eyes to the window, where Crawford is standing.

Leaning, rather, against the woodwork of the window, as though power to support himself unaided is gone from him. Blount regarding him, feels that he is growing cold. What face is that? Is it Crawford's? Great heaven, what a ghostly thing? Livid, with drawn mouth and eyes staring, staring at the

ground before him, as though seeing there some gruesome thing that he fain would pluck up, and grapple with, and destroy. Is the man going to have a fit?

"Crawford, Crawford, I say," says Blount, taking a step towards him.

CHAPTER XII.

His voice, piercing through that cruel mist of memory, recalls Crawford to himself.

"Yes, yes. What is it?" says he vaguely.

"I wish I knew," says Mr. Blount indignantly. "Here I am at one moment reading a simple paragraph from the *Times*, and lo! and behold in the next the whole world blows up. There's Evelyn bolted out of the room at a tangent, without a word of explanation."

"Evelyn?" says Crawford, gazing at him in a dull sort of way. "What has Evelyn to do with it?"

"That's it, my dear fellow! That's the whole affair, don't you see? I read to her of the murder of a poor old gentleman, who was done to death about a hundred years ago by some dastardly ruffian, and she flies out of the room as though she herself had committed the deed."

"She—but why should *she* care?" asks Crawford, his face growing even greyer.

"Why should you, for the matter of that? Why the mystery here," says Mr. Blount, pointing to but not touching the *Times*—he has had enough of it for one day—"is a fool to this one. I wish you would explain."

"Evelyn—she was distressed," stammers Crawford.

"My dear fellow! If you are going to look like that on every occasion on which your wife is a little upset, you'll have a gay old time of it," says Mr. Blount scornfully. "Mrs. D'Arcy," going over to her, as he sees she is wiping her eyes and has stopped crying, "tell us, *do*, what has so disturbed Evelyn. It is all my fault apparently; but, as you well know, I wouldn't hurt her if my life depended on it. And here's Crawford about as unhappy as they make 'em, because of her."

"Indeed you mustn't take it so much to heart," says Mrs. D'Arcy, gazing kindly at Crawford, and feeling greatly touched by his pallor. "It was a shock to the poor child, of course, but it was nobody's fault—no-

body's," with a reassuring glance at Batty. "You see we never speak of it, and when you read it out so abruptly, without any warning, she was naturally a good deal disturbed."

"But read what?" asks Mr. Blount, with pardonable impatience.

"That paragraph. It came on her like a thunderbolt. Dear Mr. Crawford, you must not be so unhappy about her, you look really ill. It was unfortunate that Batty should have read out about that old—old—terrible affair—but she will get over it by the evening."

"But she——" says Crawford. He strides up to Mrs. D'Arcy, a wild light in his eyes and lays his hand on her arm. "That old affair—that old man—what had he to do with her?"

"*He was her father!*" says Mrs. D'Arcy simply.

"Oh, great Heaven!" cries Crawford, in a fearful tone. "Oh, Evelyn! Oh, my little girl!"

It would be impossible to give any con-

ception of the agony that thrills through his voice and shakes his frame.

"It is impossible! Impossible, I tell you! Is there no mercy! Is God a devil? And her name—her *name!*" He stops short—a gleam of exquisite hope lights his face. "Her name is D'Arcy!" cries he exultingly.

"Oh, Mr. Crawford, you must not take it like this, you must not, indeed," exclaims kindly Mrs. D'Arcy, with pathos in her trembling voice. She is frightened and troubled by his manner. "Why should you regard it as so *present* a misfortune? It all happened so long ago, and Evelyn should be taught to regard it calmly, not violently. If you look at it in this way, you will only encourage her in what must be termed a morbid regret."

"Her name—her name?" says he with parched lips.

"That can easily be explained—how I wish I had explained it always," cries she, with a remorseful glance at Batty. "But no one knew anything about it, except Eaton Stamer,

and Evelyn made him promise to be silent. Her name is Darling."

"Ah!" says Crawford. It is hardly an exclamation—it is only a faint low sigh. This last blow, coming on the others, has left him almost lifeless. Her father! *Her* father!

"She has been a little absurd about it, all along," says Mrs. D'Arcy mournfully. "One would think it was a crime that she had committed, or her poor father, instead of that miscreant, who was never brought to justice. But she has always been terribly sensitive about it, and she is a child that one must give in to, she is so sweet, and so impetuous, and so endearing. Oh! when it happened—although she was so young, only seven years old—it seemed to crush her little spirit to the earth. It would have broken your heart to see her pretty face. She was too young, surely, to have been capable of feeling so acutely; yet she suffered as certainly no child ever suffered before or since. She was motherless, you know, and she and her poor father were all in all to each other. He was wrapt up in her, and she in him. When

first the colonel brought her home to live with us, I thought she was going to die."

"Poor child!" says Mr. Blount gravely.

"It was not all grief, perhaps, though that was very strong. You see," hesitating, "she had had a fearful shock. It was she who discovered the—the body. She was the first to enter the room and see her father lying dead. He was a very old man to *be* her father. He had married late in life. He was lying as though he had been laid out, and the child ran up to him and looked down, and there was some blood, and it was creeping into his parted lips," shuddering, "and——"

"Stop! Stop!" cries Mr. Crawford, throwing up his hands and staggering back against the wall.

"Oh! if you feel it so much for her, what must *she* have felt?" says Mrs D'Arcy. She looks at him in wonderment. How fond he is of her! How terribly fond! She had heard from Mr. Vaudrey and others of his kindness, his sympathy, but that he should feel like this for another's grief, is beyond any experience she has ever had. "I really

think she would have died," she goes on presently, "if it hadn't been for Jimmy. He was quite a little fellow then—a mere baby, and she grew so fond of him; she took him right *into* her, as it were. I don't think she is quite so devoted to him now," says Mrs. D'Arcy, with a nervous little laugh. "They squabble a good deal; but just at that time Jimmy was a mine of gold to her."

"But why did you change her name?" asks Blount, who has been profoundly interested.

"Well, you see, D'Arcy and Darling have something of the same sound, and Jimmy's nurse, stupid creature, would from the first call her Miss D'Arcy; and it struck the colonel that it would be a good plan to adopt the nurse's stupidity, and so separate Evelyn's mind as much as possible from her unhappy past. Besides," says Mrs. D'Arcy, "we grew so fond of her, that I believe we liked to fancy our name was hers. And by degrees, as the servants were changed, all the new ones naturally called her Miss

D'Arcy, that is when she grew too old to be Miss Evelyn, and so it became a habit, and remained so."

"Strange!" says Blount. "To lose one's identity so entirely, to actually give up one's name, must be a singular experience."

"Not so very singular, after all. Not more singular than when a girl marries. She gives up her own name then, too, but no one thinks anything about it. Mr. Crawford, you look very ill. Sit down there, and let me get you a glass of sherry."

"No—no, thank you." He seems to have a difficulty about uttering even these few words. He is still leaning against the wall, looking shrunken, old, ashen.

Blount once again regards him curiously. *Is* it going to be a fit—or——

"A little brandy, then?" says Mrs. D'Arcy, who is growing frightened. She casts an eager supplicating look at Batty, as if desirous of his opinion as to what is best to be done with the pale shaken man before her. It is perhaps the one and only time on record that Mr. Blount's opinion has been

sought. And now in vain. His gaze is still riveted upon Crawford.

As if disturbed by it, and conscious of it, the latter rouses himself.

"You are very good—too good," says he faintly. "But—nothing, thank you. I feel upset, unnerved. I have an old enemy"—with a faint smile—"that often does battle with me, and I meet him best when alone. You will give my love to Evelyn, and tell her how—how——" He stops short as if unable to complete his sentence. "Tell her I had to go."

"I'll tell her everything kind, you may be sure," says Mrs. D'Arcy genially. And indeed if he believes in nothing else, he may be quite sure of that. "But are you equal to the walk home? Can I not——"

"I shall like the walk; the rain—good-bye——" He finishes his adieux with unconscious brusqueness—*he* the ever kind and gentle—and leaves the room with a strange abruptness. To Blount it suggests itself that the "old enemy," whatever it is, would have taken possession of him then and there had he

remained a moment longer. The "old enemy" —was it the Devil?

Mr. Blount's lively mind flies o'er unknown spaceless tracts.

CHAPTER XIII.

"QUEER fellow. Did you ever see such a face?" says he, when Crawford has finally disappeared and the hall door has been heard to bang comfortably and securely behind him. "I'm glad he's gone. He'd give one the jumps."

"What a heart!" says Mrs. D'Arcy, who is one of those who "thinketh no evil." "I wish Evelyn could know how he felt for her, poor darling."

"I don't. I think she'd have been frightened out of her wits. If he had had horns and the orthodox hoof he'd have been perfect."

"Oh! Batty, and you who always are so good-natured."

"Well, better say what one thinks than tell a lie about it. He has the oddest way of showing sympathy that ever *I* saw. When you mentioned the word blood I thought he was going to scream."

"Some people are singularly sensitive about blood."

"Some people—yes."

"I hope he will get home safely; he looked terribly unstrung."

"The rain will do him good—it will cool him. He was a volcano when he left this; let us hope he will be burnt out before he reaches the Grange, or I wouldn't give twopence for that ancestral spot.'

"Poor man! I think perhaps I ought to have ordered round the colonel's dog-cart——"

"He's all right," says Mr. Blount reassuringly. "His fevered brow is now being cooled by the most unpleasant process I know, and he'll come up to time presently, without a scratch." He is silent for a moment, and then:

"I am sorry about Evelyn. I don't think anybody ever heard her story; except Eaton, as you say."

"Only Eaton."

"And why Eaton specially?" with a lengthened glance at her.

"He is such an old friend of hers," says

Mrs. D'Arcy, so plainly without *arrière pensée* that Blount on the spot acquits her.

"It isn't altogether useful to be an old friend sometimes."

"Why? I like old friends. An old friend is like an old chair. One delights in it—one finds shelter within its kindly arms."

"And yet sooner or later it is pushed aside, relegated to the garret and a brand-new fourteenth-century article, shaking on its ancient pins, but *priceless*, takes its place."

"With fickle people only."

"Is Evelyn fickle?"

"What do you mean, Batty?" says Mrs. D'Arcy, sitting up suddenly, with a brilliant flush. "Do you mean anything about Evelyn? Oh! no, there was never anything between her and Eaton. How often have I wished that there might have been! I was never more disappointed in my life than when she accepted Mr. Crawford."

"No?" He pauses. "No, no, of course there was nothing. And a good thing too. I was only romancing, talking folly. But I wish if Plutus *was* to come up this way like spring

—that he had come in other guise than Crawford."

"Oh! I don't," says Mrs. D'Arcy. "There was never any one so good as Mr. Crawford. He will adore her, and take care of her, and grant her lightest wish."

"She'll have had quite a lot of names by the time she marries him," says Batty. "Darling—D'Arcy—Crawford. After all, her own seems made for her. It excels the others. Evelyn Darling! Darling Evelyn! It's a distinctly reversible name. That's its charm perhaps. And it loses nothing by the reversing. Perhaps it gains indeed. At all events it suits her admirably either way. Happy girl! With such a name, she should never change it. And for a commonplace Crawford too. By Jove!" going back to his first puzzled manner, "He *is* a queer fellow!"

* * * * *

Meantime the "*queer fellow*" has taken his homeward way — going stolidly onwards through rain and mire, taking no heed of it, or of anything that crosses his path—filled

only with a desire to find shelter, to be able to hide his head where no man may see him.

Yet he is so far alive to this fresh misfortune —this *crowning* misfortune that Heaven has sent as a last blight upon his head—that two words beat incessantly upon his brain, and keep time to his rapid footsteps as he goes.

"Her father—her father—her father!" The very stones on the road seem to cry them aloud; the wild wind shrieks them in his ears; the mad rain drives them writ in fiery letters across his eyes!

It is with a groan of passionate relief that reaching his library he closes the door, and flinging himself, face downwards, upon the table, his usual position, gives himself up to thought. The door is locked—intruders are far from him—now, at last, he is alone with this new demon that relentless Fate has flung into his path. How is he to grapple with it? Better give up at once, and let the monster devour him as he stands!

Of all men in the world, why should it be *her* father? Was he not cursed enough in taking human life, in the ceaseless remorse

that has pursued him night and day, for that one mad, *unmeant* crime, that now this awful sequence to it should be thrust upon him? Oh! what vile revenge. Is Heaven implacable? Is there a Heaven? One reads of it—a sweet place—restful—free from guile, from cruelty, from vice of every sort, and yet it can shower down out of its greatness, its strength, such tortures as these upon weak irresponsible man.

There are so many men. If the deed had to be done—if he was to be so afflicted as to be ordained as the doer of the deed, was not that bad enough? Did the kind, merciful Heaven of our fables go farther still and ordain that the doer should be punished doubly for the deed in which he was but the actor under compulsion?

Compulsion! ay, that was it. He had not willed that old man's death. Was he, then, responsible for it? It was a mere shake, a knock of the grey head upon the floor, an act that would scarce have slain a babe! and yet murder—so-called—was done. There was malevolence in that—in many things this old

earth has seen. The carrier, travelling with his load of hay, sleeps, falls from his resting place upon the topmost height of his load, and is killed stone dead. The mason, losing his balance, falls three times the height the carrier fell, and is picked up with a broken leg—no more. Brain and all the rest of the body sound, and with life still strong in him. What evil management, then, had the arranging of all this—the decreeing of the death of that old man from a simple blow—the casting of the stigma of murderer upon another man, *because* of it?

He starts to his feet. There is a wild defiance in his eyes. No, he will *not* give in! This persecution has gone far enough. He will defy Fate—Heaven—all things! She knows nothing, she need never know. He will lay the case before her—supposititiously, of course—and by *her* word he will rise or fall, and by no other. All other allegiance now and for ever he will fling to the winds—the winds of that Heaven that has blasted him.

He throws his arms upwards as though in declaration of his emancipation. Henceforth,

"Evil be thou my good." The window is open, and the wet, fierce rain rushing in, seems to mingle with his mood and drench him with its own defiance.

She—and she alone—shall decide for him—for life or death. All is in her hands. He will put the case before her—an imaginary case—and watch her as she answers. If she could forgive for another, why, then, she could forgive for herself. And yet, to make more sure, why not represent to her her *own* case; tell her of Mrs. D'Arcy's revelation; confess himself aware that her father had been—been ——No! He grows savage here, and beats his fist lightly against the window frame. Killed by misadventure! And, if so—if—if it were proved to her that the slayer of her father had done him to death unknowingly, could she not then forgive?

It is his last chance; he will not fling it aside. Brushing the raindrops from his forehead, he moves steadily across the room. His eyes meet the clock. Six o'clock—so late! How many hours then has he spent struggling with his misery? Hunger is so far from him

that the thought of food does not suggest itself.

He will go to her now—now, this moment. The sooner the better. Let him know whether it is to be life or death before the night closes in. It is dark enough now, but, by a miracle, as it were, the rain has ceased, and a last vague, half-hearted suspicion of daylight has crept into the room.

Ringing the bell, he orders the dogcart round to the door.

"You will be back to dinner, sir?" asks the man with a respectful glance, full of suppressed concern.

"Yes, probably."

"A glass of wine, sir, before you start?" lingering, and with increasing anxiety in his tone. His master's appearance is causing him honest disturbance. According to the present laws of etiquette, a servant is tabooed from approaching your spiritual state, and can therefore only minister to your body.

"Well, yes! thank you; you may bring me one," says Crawford, noting with the inborn thoughtfulness for others that distinguishes

him, the longing of the man to do something for him, anything to give him comfort of some sort—and gratifying it.

Drinking the wine hastily, he springs into the dogcart and is driven rapidly away.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Miss D'Arcy has a headache, but I'm sure she'll see you, sir," says the neat-handed Phyllis who opens the door for Crawford. She stares a little at seeing him at this hour, and for the second time to-day. But, with the talent for romance that adorns her class, she puts what she calls "two and two" together in no time, and revels in the niceness of her construction—not a flaw anywhere.

He hadn't been here five minutes in the morning when Miss D'Arcy had left the room all in a flurry, her face a sight to see; evidently a row. (Vol. I.) He'd stayed on a bit, hoping to see her again, and talking like anything to Mrs. D'Arcy. There had been a lot o' talking probably trying to induce the old lady to get her to come down again, but Miss D'Arcy hadn't budged, and very proper too. (Vol. II.) An' 'ere 'e is now, looking for all the world like a dead man, an' serve 'm

right! But, o' course, Miss D'Arcy will come down *now* an' make it up with him. Girls *is* sich fools! (Vol. III.)

"Where is she?" asks Crawford.

"In the master's study, sir. She said she'd like to be alone, as 'er 'ed was so bad. Shall I tell her you're 'ere, sir?"

"No," says Crawford shortly. He crosses to the hall, and gently opening the door of "master's study"—a truly remarkable apartment—enters.

Evelyn, who has been sitting by the fire, with no other light in the room save that cast by glowing coals, starts to her feet and comes quickly to him.

"How foolish to come out this damp night," says she. "But it is just like you; you knew I was upset, unhappy, and you came to comfort me."

"No; to gain comfort," says he in a terribly sad voice.

"I know what that means. To give comfort is with you to gain it. Oh! you are too good to me," says she with a pang of passionate remorse. Why—why can't she drive from

her all memory of that other, and give her heart entirely to this good—this perfect man —this prince amongst his fellows?

"I have heard all. Mrs. D'Arcy told me," says he, placing a strong constraint upon himself and compelling his fainting spirit to touch lightly on the one horrible fact that has laid his life in ruins.

"Yes, I know. And perhaps," says she, looking up at him in the flaming firelight, "you dislike what she told you—you shrink from the daughter of a man who had been—murdered." She shudders perceptibly.

Crawford lays his hand upon the back of the chair next him. It is perhaps as well that she cannot clearly see the workings of his countenance. *He* to shrink from her! Heaven! if she only knew how he does shrink! and why! And if she knew all, how she would shrink from him, wit fear—with horror unspeakable.

"You do not speak," says she sadly. "Well, I don't wonder. It has always seemed to me that to have a horrible thing like that connected with one, must shock people. I couldn't

bear to have it talked about. Kitty has been very good about it. And you see," with growing melancholy, "I was right about it. You know it now, and now——" she breaks off suddenly. "Oh! it has blighted all my life," cries she with nervous passion.

If she had but known how each word of hers stabs the man standing beside her! He is thankful for the dull light that veils his features and hides from her his pallor—glad, too, for the first time, that she has covered her face with her hands and so hidden it from him. It has been given to him then to blight her life!

"You take an entirely wrong view of it," says he in a dull sort of way. Indeed he scarcely knows what he says. "You think that I—I——" His voice dies away altogether. It is impossible to say anything about that. "One can feel nothing for you save grief, pity, remorse——" He drags himself up sharply—a wrong word surely.

"Remorse! There is but one person who should feel that," says Evelyn: "the man who killed my father."

"And if he felt it?" says Crawford, drawing nearer to her, but not attempting to take the small pretty hand that hangs so listlessly at her side.

"Well?" says she, turning her face to his, as though waiting for his reply. Her tone has hardened; as the fire-light flames up and shows her face he can see that it is cold and stern and unforgiving.

"Remorse is a terrible thing," says Crawford slowly. "It is the worm that never dieth. It gnaws for ever. Death is a small thing! We are here, we are gone. The sudden ceasing is so slight a thing that we scarce know of it. But to still live, and still be always dying—to endure the death-pang daily—hourly, *there* is anguish truly—the fire that *never* is quenched."

"Death for him who dies is a small thing, perhaps, but how for those he leaves behind him? Is it so small a thing for them? How of their grief, their never-ceasing regret—their shuddering recalling of——"

She trembles and sinks into a chair; but, though her body has grown weak in this

moment of remembrance, her beautiful face still retains its expression of relentless anger.

"There is such a virtue as mercy."

"Did *he* show mercy?"

"No—no, truly—and yet he did not mean perhaps to—kill——"

"Oh, who shall say that? It is easy for those who are outside the pale of it to talk lightly of a wrong like mine. 'Every one can master a grief but he that has it.' And my father! An old man, they tell me—though he never seemed old to me: the gentlest soul alive—the most loving. After all these years I still feel in my heart the tender words, the soft sweet names by which he called me. He never wronged a man—yet some man slew him—some devil, rather!" She has risen, and a very passion of revenge is quickly stirring in her. "You speak to me of mercy—to *me*. I tell you the poignancy of my grief is added to by the knowledge that now all hope of bringing his murderer to justice is at an end."

"Why should it be?" cries he. "Any day you may meet him face to face!" As he says this the strange, wild strain that lies in him,

and that can change him from saint to demon at a breath, awakes within him; he bursts into loud laughter.

"Oh! that I might!" cries the girl feverishly. "That *I* might be the one to give him up to a just judge. You think me cruel, harsh, unfeminine; but it was so *wanton* a crime, so uncalled for, to put out that gentle life, to silence that kindly spirit, that had no word but good for any one."

"If—if, however, it could be proved to you that it was an accident—a deed committed in haste—unmeant—and afterwards repented of——" His voice is hoarse, scarcely audible indeed. "Repented of as was never crime before. How then? There would be forgiveness, then, Evelyn! *Then!*" He has grasped the mantelpiece with one hand, and is shaking from head to foot. "Say it. *Say* it!" entreats he in a dying tone.

"Never!" cries she vehemently. "Coward! dastard! to kill a man old and enfeebled. *Never*, I tell you!" She is too agitated herself to take any notice of the emotion that has mastered him. "And you—*you*," ex-

claims she with passionate reproach, "why should you take his part? If you dread to marry a girl whose longing for revenge on her father's murderer is *eternal*, why," impetuously, "the road is open to you to escape."

"It is not that," says he faintly. The last dull spark of hope has gone out, the hearth is black and cold.

"No! How could I so misjudge you?" cries she, bursting into tears. "I know well how it is with you. You, with your sweet charity for all men, would even condone this worst of crimes—would seek forgiveness for the author of it. But I am not like you. I could never be as good as you are—much as it may grieve you. I must *make* you understand that if I lived for a hundred years I should still cry aloud for vengeance on my father's murderer."

"So—is it so?" says he in a voice so low, so strangely quiet, that it acts on her like a sudden rush of cold air. Her vehemence dies from her. He is sorry for her perhaps—a little grieved that she should be of so unforgiving a spirit.

"You feel disillusionized," says she sorrowfully. "You know I often told you I was not so desirable a person as you thought me."

"If I had been that man—that murderer," says he irreverently as it seems to her. His eyes are fixed with a most touching melancholy upon hers. Had he heard her last words?

"Oh! why discuss the impossible?" returns she with a little gesture that would have waved the thought aside.

"But if I *had* been," persistently. His voice is as that of a dying man, and indeed death is fast closing in upon him. This is his last throw, his final effort to vanquish the dread shadow that for ten long years has brooded over him, crushing out light and freedom and the quick joy of living.

She is struck once again by his wonderful quietude; but, then, he is always quiet. It is but a deeper phase of his usual manner. Great heaven! If she could but have looked into his heart and read there the wild storm of impatience that is almost rending soul from body as he hangs upon her answer, how

would it have been with her?—with him? Would there have been anger shown—and a sharp revulsion? a horror hardly to be described? or pity—purest of virtues? or mercy the divinest?

"No—no. Why ask the question?" says she, shrinking from the bare idea of connecting him in any way, even in an idle moment, with the one being whom in all her kindly life she has hated.

"But if I had been that man!" repeats he with a determination that has something of madness in it. His tone is even lower now, his face more impassive. Within the storm is raging with a deadlier force. Evelyn shrugs her shoulders impatiently.

"Why, if you will have it," says she, vexed with him for what seems a triviality to her, "I should loathe you as you would deserve to be loathed. Not all your kindness, all your love for me, could quench my hatred or gain a pardon for you. I should crush *you* as though——"

The words seem to die upon her lip. Tears tremble in her lovely eyes. For the first time

in all their short acquaintance she runs to him and throws her arms around him. There is affection as well as repentance in her action.

"How can I talk to you like this?" cries she remorsefully. "It is quite true what I have said; but then, why make me say it? I am a horrid girl to speak to you thus harshly—you who have been so good to me, who saved me from great, great grief, who saved my *life*."

His arms close round her. Convulsively he holds her to him, bending his head until his lips meet her soft brown hair. Oh! pretty head! Oh! little tender dove! Oh! *just* God, but *merciless!*

It is but for a moment he holds her so. It is an eternal farewell, and brief, but full, as eternity itself. And now a deadly chill has seized upon the heart against which he had pressed her with such a passion of despair.

He releases her, almost repulses her. If she knew would she suffer his embrace, would she not rather thrust a dagger into the breast on which but now she lay?

Well—well—well.

All at once a curious sense of indifference falls on him. A flame, flaring up vigorously, reveals his features to the girl and accentuates the utter stillness of them. A moment ago, and the pressure of his arms had seemed to assure her of his love for her, and now—— Oh! if she might understand him better—might learn to grow to him in all things good —the only things that *he* could ever teach her.

The girl's unconsciousness is blessed, but nevertheless cruel. If she could have known, perhaps, perhaps, out of the sweetness of her nature, she might have given him in time, not what he first sought, indeed, but a gentle pardon, an absolution born of many tears, a little gracious outstretched hand that might have healed his broken heart and led him heavenward.

But she knows nothing. To her his strange attitude, so curiously still, betrays no smallest grain of the truth. She wonders at him, that is all. How can she tell that this sudden calm that has fallen on him is the beginning of the end. That life, for him, is virtually

over. That longing, and grief, and despair, and the cruel restlessness of uncertainty are done with for ever. He stands there stunned —hopeless—his face is passionless. One last thought is clear within his mind. In some odd way it penetrates the gloom that is fast gathering round him, and pleases him. Her last dear words, what were they?

"You, who saved my life."

Ay, truly! If he had taken her father's life, he had given her back hers. That should count. In a dull sort of way he tries to argue this out to his advantage, but failing, falls back upon the knowledge that the sooner he gets away, and——

Yes, yes. What is there to delay for?

He is conscious of a little feeling of impatience. Yet he had saved her life! A young, fresh life is surely worth two of any *old* life—*old life!* An old man—old man——.

"Good-bye!"

He wakes up abruptly from his terrible dreaming to find himself bidding Evelyn good-night. Had he said anything since—anything strange? He cannot remember.

"Good bye," says she in her own pretty, gentle way that of late has grown so quiet. "Shall I come to the door with you?"

In a dream still, he makes a gesture of refusal.

"No." His tone is decisive; and Evelyn, trying to see him through the gloom of the firelight as he goes to the door, stands still, puzzled, uncertain.

At the door he pauses and looks back at her.

"Good-bye!" says he again. Something in his tone (his face is now hidden from her because of the darkness) touches and frightens her.

"You will come back to-morrow?" cries she eagerly, making a step towards him.

"Not to-morrow!" There is a dull certainty in his tone.

A moment later the door has closed. He is gone.

CHAPTER XV.

The chill air outside revives his body, but gives no health to his mind. In the same chilled, numbed fashion it refuses to answer to any call on it, being conscious only of the desire for solitude—for home—for the locked door of the library, behind which *it* may be done.

This desire—the desire (restrained) of many years—gains full sway now, and in the diseased brain of this man, trudging homeward through the mud and slush (forgetful of the dog-cart that had brought him, and that now stands awaiting his orders in the yard at Firgrove), grows to gigantic proportions, and fills him with a coming sense of delight long delayed. All other thoughts give way to it. Life, Love, Pleasure, Ambition—what have they to offer that can compete with the charm of Oblivion!

The house is gained; the library reached; the drawer unlocked. He stops a moment!

It lies before him now, in the palm of his hand. Such an inconsequent thing! A mere dusty substance that a breath, blowing upon it, might easily reduce to nothingness—if such a great void be—and yet possessed of power that larger things might envy.

She had said she would be revenged on him. *If she knew!* Well, without knowing, she shall be revenged! The utmost she could do would be to exact a life for a life, and the utmost shall be hers! It is as well, too—as well. In spite of all the mad fancies—born of her sweet face—*was* happiness possible to him? Other people might be strong enough to weather such life-storms as he had known, but was he one of them? He who had been broken, spent, and crushed against the rocks and jagged edges of life, even before youth was at an end?

All this in a disjointed way came to him, and caused him to feel a sort of distant pity for himself—regarded as another. And with this came vaguer thoughts that still did not

deter him from his purpose, but had, all of them, a strange sweet attraction in them—sweet almost as she was! And since he could not have her, why——

They toss him to and fro and play with his dwarfed mind as though with a malignant desire to add to the poignancy of his despair, and always (strange inconsistency!) they draw him towards them.

"Death is darkness," cry they. "In the grave there is no light." And again, "Worms destroy memory."

Memory!

He shifts the tiny powder (that shines like a crushed diamond) from the paper that holds it into a wine glass at his elbow. His dulled mind wanders from the present moment to another, when he had gained this powder from an Arab sheikh, not by stratagem or intrigue, or for love of money, but through love of him—Crawford. They *had* loved him, those poor proud souls over there.

It had a special power, a special charm—this gift of the old Arab, who had adored Crawford, not only for service done (though

Crawford had rescued his son from a disgraceful death), but because of a strong friendship for him, that had arisen at first sight and had grown with knowledge of him.

A little light, sparkling powder, but it could kill, without fear of after consequences. No one, when it had done its work, would know where the subtlety of it lay. No mark would betray its presence. The body would lie there cold and still, defiant of criticism. The sheikh, who loved not his enemies—who was indeed always at war with them, and who would gladly have had the destroying of them at any moment—was desirous that Crawford should at all times be enabled to cry quits with *his!*

Raising a caraffe at his elbow, Crawford, with a steady hand, pours some water upon the tiny crystals in the glass. A moment they bubble, foam upwards, and then die. Crawford, raising the glass, drains it. A moment later, *and he too, like those bubbles—perishes!*

* * * * *

The servants, frightened, had burst open the door at last. They had found him in his usual position—his arms spread upon the table, his head lying on them. It was all so natural that their first impulse was to retreat again, and discuss the best means of gaining his pardon for their rash intrusion. Then the all-powerful silence of death filled them, and convinced them that their fears had not been groundless.

One of them went forward, and with shaking hands lifted his master; one gaze into that pale countenance was enough. Crawford was indeed dead. The man settled him back in his chair most carefully, as if with a view to his comfort, and then—as if struck by the futility of his action—burst into tears. Yes. He was dead. Gone past recall. He had closed his last account with life and from henceforth would owe no man anything, save the debt of kindly remembrance.

And many paid him that debt. It was odd how great a number woke to the fact that he had been dear to them, when he was beyond

their power to tell him of their affection. He had been good to so many—so gentle to all. Was there one harsh word he had uttered since he came amongst them? If there was, no one could call it to mind. A sad man—depressed, and evidently a prey to melancholia—he had gone through their midst, with a helping hand outstretched, and a kindly word, or a conciliatory or a pleading word, for everybody.

The poor missed him!

Consternation reigned in Fenton-by-Sea. Evelyn gave way to wild and almost hurtful grief. There was remorse at her heart, that burned, and gave her no rest. Oh! that last evening! when he had said "Good-bye." *Why* had she not kept him with her—instead of letting him go coldly, with just a frugal word here, an unloving smile there? She should have *known* that he was ill!

Heart disease! said the local doctor, after an examination that seemed to puzzle him slightly. There were strange symptoms, so very unimportant that he was enabled to call the cause of death "Weak action of the

heart," with a clear conscience. After all, no two men's constitution was the same, as no two men's noses were alike; and if there was some vague difference in this death from heart disease to those others known to him, why sciences of all kinds were now but in their birth, and thorough development and knowledge was for those years that should have forgotten *his* dead bones. So thought the doctor, and as he was a clever man, and a power in his way, so thought all Fenton-by-Sea.

The funeral was unusually large. All the county followed the dead body of Crawford. The exclusive county, who scarcely thought any one who had not been born and bred amongst them for generations worth a condescending nod. Devils might have laughed as they watched the sedate county folk marching in their carriages behind the carriage that contained the corpse of the murderer, the suicide—the carriage commonly known as a hearse. In his life crime had dishonoured him—in his death men showed him all honour.

He was lowered into his grave amidst a dead and impressive silence, broken towards the end by the sobs of some poor women to whom his bounties had meant life. He was gone! Their benefactor—their one hope—their earthly saviour. How were they to exist without him? Mr. Vaudrey, reading the burial service in a very uncertain tone, grew even more uncertain as these mournful sobs reached him. Alas! poor souls! How could he supply the place of the good man gone —the *rich* man gone?

Yet the rich good man in going had remembered. His will left much to the poor of Fenton-by-Sea.

He could not know that then, and he read the service with a deep and earnest grief at his heart—grief for Crawford, whom he had learned to love and rely upon for his beloved poor, and grief for his poor thus bereaved.

His voice quavered and shook as he went on.

"In sure and certain hope."

Beautiful words! But vain! Yet never had Mr. Vaudrey read this solemn service with

so satisfactory a belief in the truth of it. As the black coffin was lowered into the grave, containing a secret blacker than itself, and holding it grimly for all time, no smallest revelation of that secret sways the air or blanches the faces of the mourners.

Earth gave the slayer—earth takes him back. Within her bosom his dread crime will lie, unknown, until that awful day when the secrets of all men shall be revealed!

CHAPTER XVI.

Eaton Stamer, leaving the churchyard directly after the funeral, takes his way to Firgrove and asks if Miss D'Arcy is at home.

"Yes, sir."

Can she see him?

"I'm not sure, sir," hesitating, and with an evident desire to help him if possible. "I'll ask her. Miss D'Arcy has seen no one, sir, since—since——"

"Yes, I know," says Stamer, rather depressed.

"But she's in the schoolroom, sir, and all the children are out. And I think it might cheer her up like if she could get talking to somebody."

"Well, I'll try," says Stamer, feeling rather cheered-up-like himself because of the cheerful maid's suggestion. He squeezes something gratefully into her palm and makes his way to the schoolroom.

"You aren't angry with me for coming, Evelyn?" says he hastily, as the slight figure in deep mourning rises from her chair to greet him.

"Oh, no," cries she, going quickly towards him, and with evident pleasure in her greeting. It is so evident, indeed, that something else occurs to him and damps his rising spirit.

"You aren't angry because I didn't come before, are you?" asks he anxiously.

"Not at all—not at all," says she, shaking her head to emphasize her assurance. "Only ——. I have seen nobody but Marian and Mrs. Vaudrey, and——. Of course you were quite right not to come!"

This *naïve* statement he receives in a proper spirit. In truth, she looks so pale, so sad, and her lids are so suspiciously pink, that to argue with her would have been cruel—to explain herself *to* herself, brutal!

"That's what I thought!" says he gravely. He has taken her hand and pressed it. He is very duly impressed both by the occasion and her sorrowful face, but, through all, there is a latent jealousy about the deep mourning she

is wearing. Gradually he grows conscious of this unworthy jealousy, and strives valiantly to get the better of it.

"Poor fellow!" says he in a low tone replete with forced feeling.

Long pause.

"You didn't like him," says Miss D'Arcy at last, not with so much reproach as conviction.

"I hardly know why you say that. I had few opportunities of improving his acquaintance, and, of course, I was therefore a little out of it, but Mr. Vaudrey told me a great deal. He was evidently full of charity. By-the-by, Vaudrey and Bertram have gone back to the Grange with that lawyer fellow who came down to the funeral. Not a relation turned up, and his lawyer was anxious that some one should hear the will read. Though I can't see how it could concern Vaudrey or Bertram, unless, indeed, he left a legacy to Vaudrey to be used for the benefit of the poor of the parish."

"That would be very like him," says Evelyn in a low moved tone.

"Yes—ye-es—I think so," with an evident

determination to be just to the dead, at all hazards. "I confess, Evelyn, I sometimes thought him a little queer in many ways—I used even to think that he had something to conceal—something to atone for—that he had committed some——" He comes to a full stop here, warned by her eyes.

"You were always unjust to him," says she sadly.

"I suppose so," meekly.

"You didn't understand him. That was it."

"Well, no—we didn't hit it off," meekly.

"You saw nothing out of the common in him, yet he was the most gentle, the most delicate—the best man on earth."

This is sweeping; Captain Stamer very naturally feels affronted.

"Well, you don't know them all, you know," says he.

"I knew him, at all events," says she with steady persistency. "And I don't believe, if there are any, that there are *many* like him. I don't think he had a fault."

She bursts into tears. Truly, this affectionate

respect he had aroused in her—of all living women—should have gone far to wash out the shameful stain that dyed the dead man's soul. And yet—had she but known all—how she would have loathed his memory! Yet Crawford, as she saw him, was estimable.

"You loved him," says Stamer in a subdued voice, touched by her grief.

"It is true. I did love him," says she courageously. "I was not *in* love with him as the phrase goes, but I was fonder of him than I knew myself, until——. He was the kindest, dearest man. Oh!" with a long, long sigh, "I have lost a friend, indeed!"

"Yes, I suppose so," vaguely. "I wonder who the heir will be—what sort of fellow, I mean."

"I never heard him speak of any of his people. I think he had no relations."

"Every man has relations, be the same more or less disreputable or otherwise. I daresay," idly, and glad to lead her thoughts abroad, "he'll turn up one of these days."

"Who? The heir? But why wasn't he at the—*there*—to-day?"

"In Kamtschatka probably, or at the North Pole—or trying to cheat winter in Cadelgo. One can't be sure, as we never heard of him, and you see it would greatly depend on whether his lungs were delicate, or whether his liver was in a satisfactory state. We know nothing, you see, as poor Crawford was hardly what one would call a babbler."

"No. He was very dignified!"

"Very secretive! That sort of person always is—I mean—er"—seeing he is treading on dangerous ground—"he never cared to say anything that was better left unsaid."

Miss D'Arcy regards him carefully for a moment.

"You are right," says she then. "He had great tact. He was never guilty of hurting the feelings of *any one*. But what has all this to do with his heir? He need not have been secretive, as you call it," reproachfully, "about him."

"Of course not," hastily. "The fact is, few fellows like talking about their successors."

"Yes, that's true. It is very natural—it is nothing to wonder at!" hastily and as if

decrying the thought that Crawford had been guilty of any petty feeling. "I wonder—whoever he is—if he will live at the Grange."

"Crawford has two or three places," says Stamer, regarding her intently. Is she sorry for the Grange; regretful of the sad fate that has killed her chance of being mistress of it? "The new man may not care for so remote a place as this."

"No. It is a beautiful place, however."

He turns to her.

"Are you thinking," says he directly, "that it might have been yours?"

She shrinks from him as though he had struck her, and the crimson blood flies to her face. She lays her hand on the back of the chair near her, as if seeking its support, but her lips and voice are steady as she answers him.

"I have been thinking that all day," says she calmly. "But not with regret—as you imagine."

Stamer walks to the window and back again.

"Forgive me," says he, standing before her,

and looking down into her offended eyes. "I should not have said that, I know! But——"

He pauses, walks over to the window again, and stands there, gazing with unseeing eyes upon the dismal winter landscape outside. Then he turns, and reaching the table nearest her, leans against it, staring at her with the frowning brows of perplexity.

"Evelyn!" says he at last, abruptly.

"Yes?" starting out of her listless attitude, to stare at him in turn.

"I'm going away to-morrow night—to rejoin my regiment in Dublin. I——. You remember the last time I went?"

"Yes," faintly.

"I can't go away like that again, Evelyn. You will think me selfish, unfeeling, almost indecent, but I *must* speak to you before I go. That last time—if I had spoken then——"

He grows silent, and the girl's face changes from red to white. Ah, if only he *had* spoken! What miserable hours might have been dropped out of her life! Her hands tighten their hold upon each other, her downcast eyes grow full of tears.

"That was a mistake," says the young man nervously. "I fear to repeat it. Let us have no more mistakes between us, you and I. I told myself yesterday that it would be a horrible thing to come to you to-day with a tale of love upon my lips, when that poor fellow ——. But this morning I thought differently. I will risk nothing more. I feel superstitious about leaving you again without coming to some understanding with you—without telling you, although you know it so well already, that I love you."

He waits as if for an answer, but no word passes her lips; she has taken up the end of a black ribbon that catches up a fold of her gown on one side, and is drawing it idly through her nervous fingers.

"Will you marry me, Evelyn?" asks he in a low tone that trembles slightly. It is a proposal of the most formal kind, severe, uncompromising. With the shadow of the dead man still hovering over them it has seemed to him indecorous, impossible, to seek for actual happiness, to look for pleasure. To *secure* her! that is all. To leave her again, without a

distinct engagement existing between them and binding them to each other, had been beyond him, but he is full of a stern determination to accept no delight from the situation.

He has not attempted to go near her. Respect for the dead man to whom she had promised herself unwillingly, in an evil hour, keeps back demonstration of every kind. But his eyes are fastened on her with so ardent and honestly fond a light in them, as should satisfy the heart of any woman.

"Yes. In a year!" says she, still without lifting her eyes.

"A *year!* My darling! what an eternity! Make it six months."

"*Let* it be a year," murmurs she tremulously.

"As you will, of course," says he, touched by the entreaty in her tone, and the tender meaning of her request. In the entreaty did there not lie true surrender? Let him not grudge that poor lost lover anything she now can do for him.

"Thank you!" says she simply. She raises

her head; their eyes meet. Instinctively they lean towards each other, and their lips meet lightly, with a certain shrinking, and without passion. A sad little embrace, a mere ratification of the dear tie that at last binds them to each other.

"I am afraid you think me wanting in feeling," says Stamer presently. "When I am gone it will give you an unpleasant memory of me. I suppose I should not have exacted a promise from you to-day of all days—when ——; but I couldn't go away without being sure of you. You aren't," anxiously, "angry with me?"

"Not angry," she struggles with herself for a moment, and then looks up at him. "I'm glad," says she—"I'm glad you spoke. I too was frightened. Oh! if you had gone away *again* without a word, I should have died."

She makes a desperate fight with her weaker self, but grief, shock, joy—all are too much for her; she bursts into a storm of tears.

And Stamer!—alas for all his resolutions! —when he sees the very heart of him thus sobbing her little soul away, when he marks

the pretty head, bowed through grief and weariness, and so many conflicting emotions; when he sees the slender brown hands trying to hide away the weeping eyes, he gives poor human nature way, and catching his little sweetheart in his arms, presses her to his breast with all the warmth of a passion virtuously kept under for so long.

"Don't cry! Don't—*don't*, Evelyn! There now! my love! my delight! Don't be bad to me."

He has taken out his own handkerchief, and is mopping her dolorous lids with a devotion—I was going to say worthy of a better cause, but what cause is so worthy as love?

"It isn't to *you* I'm bad!" says she with a great self-reproach, that doesn't prevent her however from clinging to him with both her arms; she is afraid perhaps that a stern sense of duty may require the abolition of this new beloved suitor, and by thus encircling him she feels that she can defy duty to touch him.

"No. You are too good to me," caressing the soft hair that lies just beneath his lips, and gathering up her hand and laying it upon

his heart. "It is only that I can't bear to see you crying in the hour that at last—*at last* gives you to me. We *do* belong to each other now, don't we?"

"I don't know," sadly; "there is your mother! She—she will be angry about it, Eaton."

"Don't be unhappy about that. She is leaving Fenton."

"*Leaving?* For a time?"

"No—for ever. She may return of course now and then to delight us, but her reign at Parklands is over. You know that Bertram is going to marry Marian? I suppose," with a slight smile," I ought to put it the other way round, but Bertram is so much to me."

"Yes; I heard. I was so pleased. Marian loves him, almost"—very sweetly but sadly—"as well as I love you. But perhaps Sir Bertram—he is staying here, at all events—and perhaps he may object to your marrying me. They want a fortune for you, you know."

"Nonsense! you don't know Bertram—nobody does, I think, except myself and

Marian. He is delighted at the thought that you and I are going to be married. I suppose "—he pauses and laughs a little, and then goes on—"I suppose you know that the *mater* wanted me to marry Marian, and——"

"Wanted Sir Bertram to marry nobody. Yes; I knew," says she, nodding her head. "But I thought at one time that you too wanted to marry yourself to Marian."

"That was when you were the silliest person alive! *Now* you are the wisest—you have accepted *me!*" says he gaily. "Well, what I wanted to tell you was, that when my mother found Marian was engaged to Bertram, and not me, she surged, she uprose and finally declared that she would no longer undertake the care of Parklands. Whether this was meant, or a mere burst of disappointment, no one can tell. Bertram accepted it as it was. He is very quiet, but very capable, when occasion calls. He in fact accepted her resignation, and though she has made several attempts to rescind her first determination he has quietly ignored them. You see, you will be free from her. This"—says he smiling—

"I put forward as a further inducement to you to be true to me."

"I don't want an inducement," says she earnestly.

"We shan't be very well off, Evelyn; you know that. You won't mind, will you?"

"I shall be the best-off woman in Europe," says she.

"Well, we shan't be worse off than the Robsons, at all events, and they seem to pull through decently enough. We are neither of us given up to expensive habits."

"I'm not," says she. "But you?"

"I've never had very much money," says he simply. "Six hundred a year from my maternal grandmother, not a penny beyond, except *once*, when Bertram was awfully good to me. But I took care I should never have to ask him again. It isn't fair. Every fellow lives up to his income, and a sudden call upon him puts him in a hole. I'll give up the army, Evelyn!"

"Oh! I couldn't bear you to do that," says she; "you would regret it so. It would be too great a sacrifice."

"With you as compensation? I think not," with a fond smile. "And there's that cottage of the Harcourts—not so bad a place and plenty of rooms—and if you can put up with it——"

"Oh! Eaton."

"Well, that's settled. Six hundred a year, poor as it is, will keep us alive, and I have interest, I may be able to manage something else. At all events," giving her a little loving shake, "*I'm* all right. I'll never want for anything, so long as I have *you!*"

At this moment a servant opening the door threw them into great confusion.

"Mrs. Vaudrey is in the drawing-room, miss. Her love, and may she see you at *once*. She said as 'ow it was very important."

Evelyn looks anxiously at Stamer.

"Oh! I can't go to the drawing-room," says she. "If any one else were to come in, I——"

"Of course. I'm off," says Stamer instantly. "Show Mrs. Vaudrey in here," to the servant.

There is a quick parting embrace, a promise to return in the morning, and springing

lightly from the window to the turf outside, he disappears just as the servant ushers Mrs. Vaudrey into the schoolroom.

CHAPTER XVII.

Such an excited Mrs. Vaudrey! With a bonnet very much over the left ear, and her hair anyhow! One lock has wandered into her eye, but she doesn't seem to heed it. *The* dolman has been buttoned wrongly all the way down, and leaves a generous droop of fringe at one side, with nothing at all to signify on the other. The hands she extends to Evelyn are innocent of gloves.

"Oh! my dear, have you heard—have you heard? Oh! my dear Evelyn! Give me a chair, my love, I have run all the way. Reginald told me—he heard the will read. I have positively *raced* here. And here's the letter," holding out a sealed envelope. "Reginald promised that lawyer man—*his* lawyer, you know—to let you have it at once; so as Reginald was called off as *usual* by old Betty Sampson at the most inconvenient moment, I

said I'd bring it. The lawyer—*his* lawyer, you know—Mr. Johnson, would have brought it himself, but he had to catch the last train."

"But——" says Evelyn bewildered, holding the letter and staring at Mrs. Vaudrey, who indeed is worthy of all regard, taking her from one point of view.

"Yes, my dear, yes. The lawyer man would have come himself, and considering the importance of his mission, in my opinion he *should* have come, but it appears he had some tremendous case in town that necessitated his return. I don't wonder you're annoyed about it, but it seems he is to come down to see you first thing in the morning."

"But to see me for *what?* What has happened?" cries Evelyn, in despair of ever hearing the truth, and feeling horribly frightened. Can any fresh catastrophe have occurred?

"My dear, haven't I told you? Oh, my poor head! Reginald said I'd never be able to do it, and really *for once* I think he knew something. Oh! Evelyn. He has left you everything."

"He—Mr. Vaudrey? You mean—oh, no!" cries the girl shrinking.

"Yes. *Everything!* How he loved you! What deep devotion! He must have anticipated his death, I think. Poor, poor fellow! I daresay he knew his heart was all wrong. You are one of the richest heiresses in England, Evelyn! Every penny beyond the few bequests goes to you, and there are three estates, and——"

"But it is impossible," says Evelyn, almost falling into the seat next her. "There must be some relations, some——"

"*No* one, it appears; at least no one specially near. He seems to have been singularly devoid of relations. Some of those old families die out like that. And everything was unentailed. I ought to congratulate you, Evelyn, but I can't, my dear, I can't, when I think—— Oh! Evelyn, what do you think he has done for *us?* He has left me, *me*, £10,000. Oh! think of it—it is *riches!*"

Here the poor woman breaks down, and bursts into a passion of tears.

Evelyn, as if stunned, sits motionless. Then suddenly, as if the real meaning of it has at last entered into her, she goes over to Mrs. Vaudrey, and kneeling down beside her, lays her head against her shoulder.

"Poor, poor fellow!" sobs Mrs. Vaudrey. "Oh! my dear, what a godsend to us! And do you see how he thought it all out? It is to *me* he leaves it, in trust for the children. He loved Reginald—but he knew him too. He was well aware that if he left the money to Reginald it would all drift away, sooner or later, to the poor of the parish. He knew him and loved him, and was determined to make him comfortable in spite of himself."

"What a heart!" says Evelyn in a low tone. Her own tears are falling fast.

"Gold, gold, my dear! We none of us appreciated him half enough, though you and I, Evelyn, always saw the sweetness of his disposition. I thank God for that now. To remember that I had ever been unjust to him even in my thoughts would have broken my heart now."

"I was not unjust, but I might have been more loving."

"My dear, I really don't think you have anything to reproach yourself with. He was a different man from the day you accepted him. He was satisfied with you in every way. It is certain that you made his last days entirely happy. That he should leave *you* all he could, is reasonable enough, because we could see how he adored you; but that he should think of *us!*"

There is a long pause, during which the two women cry silently and give tender reverential thoughts to the dead man.

"It lifts us out of poverty," says Mrs. Vaudrey at length, in a low tone. "No one," with a touch of bitterness, "will be able to look down upon us *now*. I shall be able to get Reginald a new evening suit at once. There will be no sneers at him in future."

It is plain that the old sore is rankling still, but with it is a blessed sense of relief—of hitherto unknown prosperity.

Crawford, when making this generous gift,

hardly realized the intensity of the delight it would afford its recipients.

"He can give away his old waistcoats now if he will," goes on Mrs. Vaudrey, with restrained but unmistakable exultation, "I shall always be able to replace them. It is in my power from this day forth to keep decent clothes on his improvident back. It's a kind back, however, Evelyn, isn't it now?"

Good fortune has made her lenient, even to Reginald.

"It is indeed," says Evelyn gravely. Another time she might have smiled. Smiles are beyond her now. He has left her *all!* In life he had given his love—the very best of him; in death he has given her all that remained! And she? In word she had been true to him, in spirit——

"Something has been weighing on me ever since I heard it, Evelyn. It is that I can't *thank* him. If I could only *tell* him how I feel! How he has lifted one poor woman from perpetual worry to a sense of security."

The poor soul is more grateful for her

£10,000 than many another has been for twenty times that sum.

"Yes, that is the terrible part of it. I have so much—so *much* to say to him," says Evelyn, who is sobbing violently by this time. "Oh! I ought not to take his money. He did not know, he *could* not! And I should have told him; I should have left it to himself whether——"

She stops abruptly. After all, it is impossible to explain to any one all that is in her heart. One small grain of comfort remains to her. She had been true to him. She had given up Eaton. She had been willing to sacrifice her whole life. Oh! if now he knows, he cannot be *very* angry with her!

"My dear, he knew that you were the woman he could really love," says Mrs. Vaudrey, who has providentially, and quite as might be expected of her, got on the wrong scent. "And as he *has* left his money to you, and as there are no direct heirs, I consider it would be a flying in the face of Providence to refuse what he was so anxious

to give you. And would it be kind either? He is dead—poor, poor man!—and can make no protest. Is not that a reason why one should be the more careful to respect his last wishes? It would grieve him, Evelyn, if he could know that the good he meant to do you had been undone, and by you of all others."

"Yes, I suppose so. Oh! I hope I made him happy while he was here."

"No one who ever saw him with you could doubt that. What a gentle smile he had, Evelyn. I don't believe there was ever any one like him. So good to all—so charitable, so sympathetic!"

"He was a saint, I think," says Evelyn tremulously. "Oh! Mrs. Vaudrey, I can't forget that last evening he was here—the very evening he—he died! There was something in his face as he said good-bye to me—something as he looked back at me from the doorway—that goes to my heart now as I remember it. I feel I was cruel to him, that I should not have let him go. Perhaps—perhaps at that very moment he was

suffering! His heart may have been distressing him, and I saw nothing—said nothing. I let him go—to his lonely death."

There is a terrible self-reproach in her tone. She remembers how glad she had been to let him go. How she had longed for solitude to dwell on her lost happiness—to commune with herself. She had indeed forgotten all but self! *There* the sting lies!

"If I had called him back," she says.

"My dear girl, you should not let such thoughts take hold of you. If he *had* come back, with the hand of the Lord thus heavy on him, how would it have been? Why he—*it* might have occurred here, with you. Reginald says it would have been a shock too great for a child like you, and that therefore Heaven in its mercy averted it!" This seems to have been a good deal for the silent Reginald to have said. "Believe me, my dear, all is for the best."

"It is unsatisfactory!" says Evelyn sorrowfully. "How can it be for the best when a good man like Mr. Crawford is suddenly cut off from life? He was charitable, kind,

loving; he was no respecter of persons. The poor were as dear in his sight as the rich. I don't believe he was ever guilty of an unkindly action. He was faultless."

"A good thing to bear in mind of one who dies suddenly," says Mrs. Vaudrey, with a curious but unmeant assumption of her husband's manner. "Sudden death is always fearsome. But as for him! he truly was ready to go before his Maker! He had no sins upon his soul beyond the ordinary ones for which even the most righteous of us must plead guilty. Surely *he* is not suing for forgiveness vainly."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Mrs. Vaudrey has torn herself away. Evelyn has run to Kitty, and with many tears, and many reproachful outbursts, told her of the news Mrs. Vaudrey has brought—and which the letter from Mr. Johnson has confirmed.

Having told her, Evelyn has rushed back again to the schoolroom to finish her cry privately, leaving Kitty paralyzed and trying vainly to battle with the elation that is filling her kindly breast. Her child—her Evelyn—an heiress! What a thing for her! And what a thing for Jimmy—for the children! She will put Jimmy through college—perhaps get him a commission!—— Here she suddenly remembers the cause of her elation, and quails before her inner mentor, and tells herself she is a disgracefully mercenary wretch—but she rejoices for all that! A mother is of all creatures the most selfish—and yet, strange

paradox, of all creatures the most *un*-selfish!

Evelyn, having regained her sanctuary, has flung herself into a chair; she has carefully turned the key in the old lock, and with a long sigh tells herself that now at last she is secure from invasion—can think out her thoughts, and cry her utmost without fear of interruption.

One minute suffices to destroy this illusion. Captain Stamer had gone out by the window an hour ago; he now comes in by it. He has cleared the window sill, and stands opposite to her, hatless, breathless, colourless.

The radiant lover of an hour ago is as sad a visaged man at this moment as the stoniest-hearted of us might grieve to see!

"Is it true, Evelyn?" asks he without preface. It is impossible to misunderstand him. Her own heart is so full of the subject that is troubling him that she answers him at once and to the point.

"Quite—*quite* true!" says she, almost tragically.

"I would to Heaven it wasn't," says the

young man passionately. "Why couldn't he have left his money to hospitals, to homes, to Dr. Barnardo—to *any one* but you? An hour ago I was the happiest man alive. Now! It changes everything. You are one of the richest girls in England, whilst I——"

"Whilst you are one of the poorest! No, no, Eaton, you cannot make yourself a girl, even to indulge your morbid grief;" she laughs rather uncertainly. It is a laugh very much akin to tears. "What is it that is the matter with you?" asks she, going up to him, and laying a gentle persuasive hand upon his arm, that sets his blood aflame, and is seized instantly. "Do you—can *I*—forget that this morning you asked in marriage the hand of the poorest girl in England?"

"Oh, as for that," says he miserably, "I wish we stood as we did this morning. You are no longer the old Evelyn, whom I——"

"Don't talk to me like that, Eaton," says she steadily, "unless you wish to break my heart. If you feel a change it is *you* who have created it, not I. What has happened since this morning that should change any-

thing between you and I? What has money got to do with us? This morning you would have married me when I was a beggar maid; am I a different girl now—because—— Oh, Eaton! don't be unkind to me."

"I only meant to be kind," says he gloomily, still holding on, however, like grim death to the little hand. "It seems unfair to take advantage of——"

"Oh! if you go on talking to me like that I shall die," says Miss D'Arcy, with a woeful shake of her head, and an evident determination to be as good as her word. A sob escapes her; she makes a frantic effort to reach her pocket with her disengaged hand, but as that useful receptacle has been of late years carefully placed by the makers of gowns where no one can possibly get at it, she is constrained to give up the search for the handkerchief, and bury her face on Eaton's breast instead.

"Kind," cries she from this comfortable stronghold, "what do you call kind?" she speaks spasmodically, one quarter because she is crying, and the other three because Stamer, in spite of all his moody protests,

has wound his arms so tightly round her that her lungs are justly resentful of this most unfair play.

"Darling heart! You know what I mean."

"I don't indeed, and I'm glad I don't. I never heard anything so cruel in all my life!" This *naïve* denial and acknowledgment both in the same breath goes without comment. "Oh! I've such a headache," cries she with instinctive wisdom. "I've been crying all day; if you make me cry any more I shall be ill. Eaton, say we are just the same to each other that we were when—you were here—an hour ago."

"Some day you will reproach me."

"When that day comes, you can reproach me too; so we shall be quits. *Say* we are engaged to each other."

"Well—yes," says he, trying to feel reluctant, but with a very madness of joy at his heart.

"Then why don't you kiss me?" says Miss D'Arcy sternly.

He kisses her.

After a while:

"You must read this lawyer's letter," says she; "it proves he has no near relations—no one at all who could feel agrieved. And I am sure he *wished* me to have—to be his heiress. There is only one distant cousin of his, a Mr. Warren, and he is an old bachelor, and enormously wealthy. Of course he might have left it to hospitals, as you said, but——" she pauses and looks earnestly at him. "We can do a great deal of good in this parish, can't we, Eaton?"

"Yes, darling," slowly and with a quick sigh. It seems hard to him that he should be enriched by Crawford; yet to give her up would be harder still. Divining his thought, she comforts him by slipping an arm round his neck and pressing her soft cheek to his.

"Eaton," says she presently, a little shyly, yet a little maliciously too, and with a most natural sense of triumph, "your mother will not object to me *now!*"

"No," with a frown.

"Does she know?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She asked me if I was going down to see you, and desired me *to give you her love.*"

At this, after a struggle, they both laugh—in a subdued fashion truly, but until they shake again.

"Never mind," says Evelyn. "Give her mine in return. She is your mother and therefore sacred. And besides, you tell me she is going away."

"That is quite settled. Bertram, who is always so indolent, has been extraordinarily firm about that."

"I am so glad Marian is to be happy at last. You knew—did you?—that she was always in love with him. Oh! *that's* a secret—I shouldn't have said that!"

"And why not? Do you mean to say, Mrs. Stamer, that you are going to begin by having secrets from your husband?"

Here they laugh again.

"Is Sir Bertram as happy as Marian?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm sure of it. You never saw a fellow so radiant. It has quite woke him up. But after all"—pressing her to his

heart again—"he could never, *never* be a tenth part as happy as I am."

"Oh! *or as I!*" rejoins she sweetly.

* * * * *

Eaton, reaching home, makes his way straight, not to his mother, but to the library, where he is sure to find Sir Bertram at this hour, and who receives both him and his good tidings with a most satisfactory warmth. Batty, who is present, joins in the general congratulations.

"So glad, old fellow. I always knew you *were* the man, even when the engagement with poor Crawford was on."

"Crawford wouldn't have suited her," says Sir Bertram. "Kind sort, don't you know, but—er—queer, don't you think?"

"He has been very generous," says Eaton gravely. "He must have been most honest in his affection for her."

"He was generous all through. You heard what he has done for the Vaudreys?"

"Yes."

"By Jove! a lift for them!" says Batty.

"I think Crawford was one of the strangest men I ever met," says Sir Bertram, flinging the end of his cigarette into the fire, after lighting a fresh one. "I don't think he was as old as he looked, and yet——"

"Heart disease ages people," says Eaton. "I daresay it was that that gave him that strained expression in the eyes."

"Look here!" says Mr. Blount, leaning forward, and speaking with a touch of nervousness very foreign to his usual delightful self-possession. "I've had the oddest thought of late that ever——"

"My good fellow, tell us something fresh! We all know the sort of thought to be expected from you. Sanity is not your *strongest* point."

"Well, but, bar chaff! look here, you know," says Batty earnestly; "I've never spoken of it before to any one, but if either of you had seen his face that day—the day when Mrs. D'Arcy told him that Evelyn's name was Darling, and that her father had been murdered—you wouldn't have forgotten it in a hurry."

"Why so?"

"It was *horrid*, I can tell you! Like a devil! a tortured devil! It *haunts* me, by Jove!"

"Well, go on, can't you? You are evidently bursting to impart something better worth hearing than that. Crawford was never at any time a beauty."

"I can't get it out of my mind," says Batty, hesitating and growing rather pale. "It has occurred to me that perhaps he knew something of that murder—that perhaps *he* was the murderer!"

"Oh! go to the deuce!" says Sir Bertram, giving way to unkindly mirth.

"Bad advice, Bertram!" says Eaton, with suspicious gravity. "Better," turning to Batty, "go to bed, my good boy, and have your head shaved, for you are plainly on the verge of brain fever!"

THE END.

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